

Saving Saharan wildlife

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Most people see the Sahara as an exotic, barren wasteland. It is in fact full of life, with numerous plants and animals exquisitely adapted to a hot, waterless environment. In what many are calling a "silent extinction", the large bird and mammal fauna of the Sahara is facing an unprecedented conservation crisis (Table 1).

The Sahara Conservation Fund (SCF) was established in 2004 with a mission to conserve the wildlife of the Sahara and bordering Sahelian grasslands. SCF's vision is of a Sahara that is well-conserved and well-managed, where ecological processes function naturally, and plants and animals exist in healthy numbers across their historical range; a Sahara that benefits all its inhabitants and where support for its conservation comes from stakeholders across all sectors of society.

The number one threat to Saharan wildlife is over-hunting. Decades of poaching and unsustainable use have brought many species to the brink of extinction. The scimitar-horned oryx is already gone and others are sure to follow if nothing is done. It is vital to get conservation staff and resources on the ground and to find ways of creating positive incentives to conserve. For desert dwellers, the continued existence of healthy populations of wild plants and animals is an integral part of their finely-balanced livelihoods. Desert species are highly productive on otherwise marginal rangelands. Restoring healthy wildlife populations has major ecological benefits and contributes to the diversification and strengthening of pastoral economies. Wildlife also plays a key role in combating desertification through maintaining productive grasslands.

The addax is one of the most highly adapted creatures on earth. It is also one of the rarest with under 300 left in the wild, SCF is focusing efforts on protecting the remaining herds in Chad and Niger. SCF also works to reintroduce animals bred in captivity. Efforts are currently focused on Tunisia, where addax and oryx antelopes bred in country have been transferred to desert protected areas. New animals from zoos in Europe and the States will be added to ensure that the best possible genetic founder stock is available. Reintroduction is a lengthy and expensive undertaking, underlining the need to save species in the wild whenever possible. In recent years, SCF has funded or been associated with survey work in Algeria, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, Morocco, Niger and Tunisia.



Addax antelope. (© Thomas Rabeil/SCF/CMS/FFEM)

SPECIES IUCN RED DATA LIST (2006)		SCF COMMENTS & OBSERVATIONS
Scimitar-horned Oryx	Extinct in the wild	Last known animals in the 1990s (Chad, Niger).
Addax	Critically Endangered	Less than 300 in 1-2 populations (Niger, Chad).
Dama Gazelle	Critically Endangered	Less than 300 in 3-4 isolated populations (Niger, Chad, Mali).
Slender-horned Gazelle	Endangered	Limited to the sand seas of North Africa. Exact status unknown.
Cuvier's Gazelle	Vulnerable	Limited to North African uplands. Exact status poorly known.
Dorcas Gazelle	Vulnerable	Highly threatened throughout by uncontrolled hunting.
Cheetah	Vulnerable	Saharan populations extremely rare and endangered.
Striped Hyena	Lower Risk	Sahelo-Saharan populations highly endangered by persecution.
Fennec	Data Deficient	Sahelo-Saharan populations appear satisfactory.
Pale Fox	Data Deficient	Sahelian populations extremely vulnerable to poisoning.
Rüppell's Fox	Data Deficient	Research required to assess status.
Ostrich	Least Concern	Sahelo-Saharan populations virtually extinct in the wild.
Lappet-faced Vulture	Vulnerable	Threatened by persecution. Virtually extinct in North Africa.
Nubian Bustard	Near Threatened	Impact of intensive hunting unknown and needing research.
Sudan Bustard	Least Concern	Sahelian populations highly vulnerable from over-hunting.
Spurred Tortoise	Vulnerable	Very few known healthy Sahelian populations.

Table 1. Conservation status of key Saharan birds and mammals.

In a world where tourism is a rapidly growing and lucrative industry, deserts have significant potential with their unparalleled scenic grandeur, cultural and natural diversity. SCF strives to ensure the world's deserts are indeed 'living deserts'. We are also aware of the Sahara's archaeological and paleontological treasures, many of which are threatened. SCF believes that local people are the best custodians of wildlife and that every effort be taken to empower them for this role.

With so many Saharan species teetering on the brink of extinction, the benefits and value they can bring to all our lives will never be realized unless we take action now to reverse the trends that have already brought extinction in the wild to one species –the magnificent scimitar-horned oryx – and threaten the survival of so many others. Both the addax and the dama gazelle are down to their last hundreds in the wild. Saharan ostrich and cheetah populations are almost gone. The once abundant gazelle and bustard populations are now threatened. For the oryx, it's perhaps too late but not for the others if we act now. For more information on SCF and its work, please see our website: www.saharaconservation.org or contact us at info@saharaconservation.org

A full version of this article is available for download from the Wildlife Middle East Newsletter website (www.wmenews.com).



Fieldwork by SCF personnel(© John Newby/SCF)



Dama gazelle (© Tim Wacher/ZSL)