



17th Annual Sahelo-Saharan Interest Group Meeting

2 days of talks on biodiversity conservation in the Sahara and the Sahel

The Sahara Conservation Fund (SCF) gathers together every year about a hundred people who are interested in the field of Sahelo-Saharan species conservation. A wide variety of partners, scientists, and experts, coming from about twenty different countries, are involved. Protecting this rich biodiversity, which is still poorly documented and overlooked in comparison with other places on earth, is the main theme of these 2-day meetings, debates, presentations and discussions. The annual meeting provides a great opportunity to update all participants about how to preserve the biodiversity of the region's ecosystems, and learn from each other's experience.

May 4 – 6, 2017

This year, the 17th annual SSIG meeting was hosted by Senegal, a country that is particularly involved in biodiversity conservation.

More than 60 researchers on biodiversity, conservationists, representatives of wildlife and Africa, employees of nature reserves and internationally-known zoos, driven by collective enthusiasm, gathered together at the Hôtel de la Poste in Saint Louis, in the north of the country.

A place known for having welcomed many famous aviators and explorers, among whom Antoine de Saint-Exupéry and Jean Mermoz, was indeed appropriate for the participants coming from around the world. And it was definitely a not-to-be missed event : like every year, two rich and intense days of conferences offered an excellent overview of ongoing conservation work undertaken in the Sahelo-Saharan area. Oryx, gerbils, bustards, giraffes.... an exceptional diversity of species has been addressed in the reports of projects located in various places of the Sahel and the Sahara.

The Sahara Conservation Fund is proud to see the federative nature and the scientific quality of this event being proven again. We wish to thank all the speakers and participant for this and for sharing their presentations, photos, and videos of the event.

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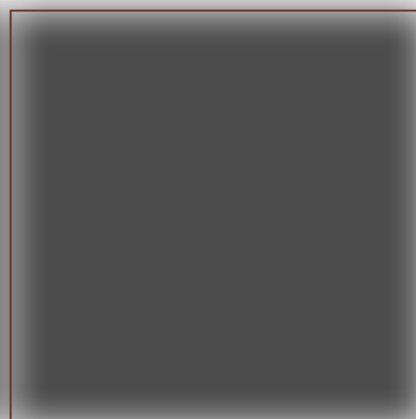
Focus on Senegal

Mr Soulaye Ndiaye, Director of the National Parks of Senegal, welcomed the meeting. Having many natural reserves and being involved in the conservation of Sahelian species, Senegal is more than ever interested in working further to preserve its biodiversity.

Mr Ndiaye provided first an overview of Sahelo-Saharan antelope conservation in Senegal. Then, three reserves were introduced to the audience : Guembeul's reserve by Thialo Sarro, Ferlo's reserve by S. Fall, and Boundou's by Abdou Diouf, Claire Clément, and Gabriel Caucanas.

Marius Niaga, Pavla Heczmanova, and Lucy Diagne choose to focus on some species of the region, particularly the sitatunga, the Derby eland, and the manatee, dealing with these topics from very relevant perspectives - such as education for instance.

And it would have been a pity to conclude the discussions on Sahelo-Saharan wildlife and Senegalese biodiversity without going to the field ! Thus, participants were taken to Guembeul's natural reserve, a few kilometres away from Saint-Louis, to visit it. After the two days of presentations, it gave them a great opportunity to ask more questions to the curators and veterinarians working there, but also to see some scimitar-horned oryx ...





A short detour through Southern Africa

Usually working away from each other in different countries, passionate experts were able to share their experiences in one place, proving again the federative value of the annual meetings of SSIG. In this regard, Philippe Chardonnet gave a detailed presentation on reintroduction activities in the national reserve of Gilé, in Mozambique, so that the audience could benefit from the lessons he learned.

Then, the audience followed Kate Burns for another detour to the east, and visited virtually the Al Bustan Zoo located in the United Arab Emirates, where unique collections of Sahelo-Saharan species are to be found.



In the core area of the Sahel and the Sahara

Chad and Niger - both key countries for SCF's work in the field - also featured prominently in the discussions. John Newby, Chief Executive Officer of the Sahara Conservation Fund, introduced the related topics, and shared the latest news on the scimitar-horned oryx reintroduction project in Chad. Tim Wachter, Mahamat Hatcha and Marc Dethier, provided some useful insights too.

Once animals are back in the wild, technology is of great help in post-release monitoring. Data and GPS localisation tools were then described in detail by biologists Jared Stabach and Katherine Mertes.

Yves Hingrat, Ali Abbagana, and Hamissou Garba also reported on their monitoring activities, but this time with Arabian bustards, dorcas gazelles in the Réserve Totale de la Faune de Gadabegi, and dama gazelles in the Takolokouzet Mountain in the Réserve Naturelle Nationale de l'Air et du Ténéré (RNNAT).

The speakers did not forget of course, to cover habitat-related topics. Thomas Martin dealt with overgrazing impact on houbara bustard, and Emilien Dautrey talked about supporting sustainable management of Sahelo-Saharan protected areas in Niger.



Going North

Conservation projects undertaken in the north of the area were presented as well. Abdelkader Jebali reported on the populations of Barbary sheep in Tunisia and the reintroduction of the Atlas (Cuvier's) gazelle in Jebel Serj National Park. Marie Petretto also provided a complete overview to the audience of the monitoring of biodiversity in Tunisia.

Again, ecosystems and habitats were not ignored. Abdenour Moussouni presented the Tassili/Ahaggar complex in Algeria, Violeta Barrios assessed the high mortality by electrocution of raptors in southern Morocco, and Peter Coals characterized the spatial and temporal patterns of botanical diversity in a hyper-arid mountain system in Egypt.



And generally speaking ?

The Convention on Migratory Species set up the Sahelo-Saharan antelopes action plan 19 years ago. It was time obviously to step back and see how to move forward, which Yelizaveta Protas did in providing a complete overview of the conservation issues from a more institutional viewpoint.

Laura Perry presented a synthesis of sensitive issues : conservation, risk and security challenges which also offering an overall review of the entire region to the participants.

Emphasis on species

Interactive sessions, specifically dedicated to a selection of Sahelo-Saharan species, were planned at the end of each conferences day, fulfilling the expectations of the participants.





During the first session on dama gazelle and addax, the group learned more about the work of David Mallon, Helen Senn, et Lisa Banfield. Interesting feedback was given and numerous questions were asked, making this specialized interlude lively and dynamic.

The second special session confirmed the success of this interactive format. Focusing on the conservation of North African ostriches, Phil Riordan, Maren Frerking, Marie Petretto and Thomas Rabeil, also reported on their actions in the field and addressed the many useful queries raised by the audience.

We were pleased to see that other talks specifically dedicated to Sahelo-Saharan animals have been very appreciated too. Arame Ndiaye interested in the evolution of small Sahelo-Saharan mammals with gerbils, and Arthur Muneza in saving the last of West Africa's giraffes. Stephen Gold unveiled a logistic plan to support Sahara Conservation Fund's team in the field with the care of North African ostriches in Niger.



The 17th edition was quite a complete event ! Interactivity, theoretical studies, conversations in the field, and practical sessions, were mixed in a vibrant and positive energy climate. During this two-day meeting, enough materials were given to the participants to look ahead and resolutely envision what still remains to be done. The importance of the upcoming work has been largely assessed since the Sahara and Sahel are a strategic area not only for Africa but also for the planet.

Sahara Conservation Fund look forward to seeing you on the occasion of the next meeting in May 2018 !

Find a 7-video playlist of selected conferences along with the photo album.

Thank you for attending the meeting and save the date in 2018 !

