

NEWS & EVENTS

The 9th Annual Sahelo-Saharan Interest Group meeting held in Al Ain

Tim Woodfine

Marwell Preservation Trust, Colden Common, Winchester, Hampshire, SO21 1JH, UK.
E-mail: timw@marwell.org.uk

The Sahelo-Saharan Interest Group (SSIG) is a network of individuals and institutions with a common interest in the conservation of the wildlife of the Sahara and bordering Sahelian grasslands. The group brings together people from many backgrounds and disciplines including governmental agencies, research establishments and other conservation practitioners.

SSIG was established following a meeting organised by the Convention on Migratory Species (CMS) in Djerba, Tunisia, in 1998 to adopt an action plan for endangered Sahelo-Saharan antelopes. The group first met in 2000 at Marwell Zoological Park in England and has continued to meet annually ever since and stays in contact via a dedicated list-serve. While species such as the scimitar-horned oryx, addax and dama gazelles continue to be an important focus for conservation action, the SSIG network now addresses a broad spectrum of Saharan biodiversity.

Importantly, the regular meetings and ongoing dialogue between members of SSIG has led to numerous collaborations in the field. A significant initiative was the formation of the Sahara Conservation Fund (SCF), the first international non-governmental organisation dedicated to conservation in this part of the world. As part of its remit, SCF facilitates annual SSIG meetings.

With obvious bio-geographical and cultural links between the Sahelo-Saharan region and the Middle East, this years' 9th Annual SSIG meeting was held at the kind invitation of the Al Ain Zoo in the United Arab Emirates. Alongside sponsorship of the event itself, Al Ain Zoo was generous enough to provide travel bursaries for representatives from several North African countries to attend the meeting, including delegates from Algeria, Mauritania, Morocco, Niger, Senegal and Tunisia.

The meeting comprised two days of presentations and discussions, followed by two further days of excursions. Proceedings began with an impressive line-up of local speakers, collectively demonstrating the great commitment of governmental and non-governmental organisations to the monitoring and management of biodiversity in the UAE. Thereafter, there were presentations on conservation activities undertaken in several Saharan countries and on a range of topics including species conservation, protected area policy, and on biological surveys and monitoring.

The final session was dedicated to a discussion on the future of the scimitar-horned oryx, a species that became extinct in the wild, but that is held in large numbers in the UAE, as well as in zoological collections across the world and on Texan ranches. Reintroduction efforts are gaining momentum with initiatives underway in Tunisia, Morocco and Senegal, and with potential for further work elsewhere in the Saharan region. With the current global custodians of these animals and delegates from former range states present, the SSIG meeting presented a unique opportunity to exchange information and ideas amongst these stakeholders. The session concluded with a consensus to produce a coordinated global strategy for scimitar-horned oryx to help set and articulate reintroduction goals.

There were further opportunities for delegates to exchange ideas and information during the subsequent two days of excursions which included visits to the Arabian Oryx Reintroduction Project at Um Al Zumoul, the Breeding Centre for Endangered Arabian Wildlife, Sharjah and to HH. Sh. Butti Maktoum's Wildlife Centre. Indeed, it proved to be a very productive few days not only highlighting common interests, but hopefully acting as a catalyst for ongoing dialogue and cross-regional wildlife conservation initiatives.

For more information on the Sahara Conservation Fund and SSIG, including proceedings from previous meetings please visit www.saharaconservation.org

Avian Endoscopy Workshop

On May 3rd 2008 the first Avian Endoscopy Workshop was held in Dubai by Dr Chris Lloyd and Dr Tom Bailey as part of the Middle East Veterinary Congress. The workshop was sponsored by Karl Storz who supplied 5 new "Telepac" mobile endoscopy units for the session. Further avian and exotic animal endoscopy sessions workshops are planned for the region. For more information contact the editors.



Figs 1. Reintroduced scimitar-horned oryx in the Dghoumes National Park, Tunisia (©Tim Woodfine).



Figs 2. Reintroduced scimitar-horned oryx in the Dghoumes National Park, Tunisia (©Tim Woodfine).

