CURRENT STATUS

ORYX ENJOYING THEIR NATIVE HABITAT

Our initial reports shows that a herd of 19 animals have ranged over 45 km from the released site, and are staying together. They seem alert, healthy, calm, well adjusted, and acclimatised to their new surroundings. Other individuals may be associating with wild Dama gazelle and displaying similar behaviours.

NEXT STEPS

As a team monitors Oryx that have already been released another team is busy preparing animals for the next shipment to Chad from EAD's breeding facility in Abu Dhabi. It is anticipated that a further shipment of animals will occur in October/November 2016. Subsequent animals will be shipped early in 2017.

هـيـئـة الـبـيـئـة - أبـوظـبـي
Environment Agency - ABU DHABI

RETURN TO THE WILD

ISSUE NO. 3

Scimitar Horned Oryx Reintroduction Programme

Razan Khalifa Al Mubarak
Secretary General
Environment Agency-Abu Dhabi

PROJECT OVERVIEW

The Scimitar-horned Oryx has been classified as "Extinct in the Wild" by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Red List. There have been no sightings for more than 25 years due to unregulated hunting, loss of habitat, and lack of resources. The UAE is home to more than 3,000 individuals - the world's largest single population. Inspired by the late Sheikh Zayed's legacy and under the direction of H.H. Sheikh Hamdan bin Zayed Al Nahyan, the Environment Agency – Abu Dhabi (EAD) is leading a major initiative to reintroduce the Scimitar-horned Oryx to its historical range in Chad. The Scimitar-horned Oryx (SHO) Reintroduction Programme is a close collaboration between the UAE government, the government of Chad, the local implementing partner - the Sahara Conservation Fund (SCF), together with other global conservation organisations.

This initiative aims to create a self-sustaining population of animals within the next 5 years. It is possibly the world's most ambitious large mammal reintroduction programme and a huge step in the field of conservation.

I hope that you enjoy this edition of our newsletter which provides an update of the progress in this ground-breaking species reintroduction initiative.

HOME SWEET HOME!

Twenty-five years after the Scimitar-horned Oryx was driven to extinction, the desert antelope is once again roaming across the grasslands of where it was last known to exist in the wild: Chad's Sahelian region.

Preparations for this epic homecoming for this majestic species and a significant step forward for wildlife conservation started back in March when the first animals were transported from Abu Dhabi to our pre-release facility in the Ouadi Rimé-Ouadi Achim Game Reserve in Chad by a cargo plane provided by Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Court.

The animals settled into the pre-release pens for an acclimatisation period of a five months prior to their release into the wild.

In July, a team of experts from EAD, SCF, Smithsonian Conservation Biology Institute (SCBI) and Zoological Society of London flew to Chad and fitted the Scimitar-horned Oryx with GPS collars. They have now been let out of their pre-release pens and are roaming freely. The Oryx seem to be settling in to their natural habitat extremely well and are enjoying the sweet grasses that have resulted from the annual rains.

OUR PARTNERS

Ministry of the Environment and Fisheries - Government of CHAD
Sahara Conservation Fund
Smithsonian Conservation Biology Institute
Zoological Society of London
Fossil Rim Wildlife Center
Royal Zoological Society of Scotland

CONTINUOUS COMMUNITY OUTREACH

In addition to the daily monitoring of the Oryx, the team in Chad are continuously engaging with nomadic herders who cross the protected area. It is already gratifying that most have heard of the project. Our teams have been met with much excitement by older herders who recall the presence of the Oryx from their childhood.

POST-RELEASE ANIMAL CARE

This is a reintroduction into the wild, so there will be no medical intervention with the Oryx. However if critical in periods of drought the team on the ground will provide water at the pre-release site.

Our rangers will be supported by an anti-poaching team from The Ministry of Environment and Fisheries in Chad.

INTENSIVE POST-RELEASE MONITORING

The 3-4 years, life span of the collars, and the ability to remotely release and programme them, will help rangers to learn more about movement, behaviour, mortality and the ecology of the species in the wild. Overall, the data will tell scientists where they go seasonally, how far they travel, whether they stay together or disperse into different social groups, and even if a poacher has taken an animal.

The GPS collars are programmed to turn on and off at specific times, enabling scientists to monitor animal movements and compare them with landmarks in the environment - from shade trees to water sources to specific kinds of vegetation they like to eat. The collars also report the temperature and the animal's activity. An accelerometer in the collar can pinpoint an animal's movement in three directions; as an animal moves its head left to right or up and down, the accelerometer captures this information. SCBI scientists will use this data to assess behaviours, including the amount of time an animal spends eating or avoiding predators. The collars are equipped with a drop-off mechanism that allows scientists to remove the collars without recapturing the animal. To ensure the projects success the team will continuously evaluate the conditions at the release site and how reintroduced Scimitar-horned Oryx adapt to changes in the environment (natural or man-made). This requires establishing baseline data prior to the release (biometric, health, behavioural, etc.), as well as assessing key parameters in released animals over time.

To address these questions, the exact fate of every founder animal will be studied at least over a period of time long enough for 2-3 cycles of reproduction to have occurred (2-3 years).