IMPACT REPORT

2025 – 2026



Sahara Wildlife Recovery Center

Saint Louis Zoo
WildCare Institute®

Background

The foundation of the Sahara Wildlife Recovery Center can be traced to the 1998 Antelope Taxon Advisory Group (TAG) meeting at the Bamberger Ranch in Texas, a private facility that at that time held a large portion of the scimitar-horned oryx for this species' Species Survival Plan. The ranch's owner, David Bamberger, agreed to host the AZA Antelope TAG meeting that year. John Newby, then the head of World Wildlife Fund's Africa Programs office, was the invited speaker and had just come from the first Convention on Migratory Species (CMS) meeting devoted to developing an action plan to address the silent crisis of extinction of Sahelo-Saharan species. At that time, John already had 30 years of experience working in conservation in Niger and Chad. He laid out a vison as to how zoos with breeding populations of key Sahelo-Saharan wildlife could contribute to raising awareness, provide animals for rewilding, and provide support (both technical and financial) for conservation efforts in the field. After John's presentation, Dave Bamberger voiced a compelling call to action for everyone in the room: If not the people in the room today, who else do we really believe will step forward to take action before these species vanish forever?

"If not us, then who?"

This became the rallying cry that launched the Sahelo-Saharan wildlife conservation movement within the AZA and beyond.

It led first to the creation of the Sahelo-Saharan Interest Group (SSIG), which was made up of zoo scientists, field biologists, members of CMS and range state representatives. With the growth of the SSIG, a more formal entity was needed, one that could sign Memoranda of Understanding, contracts and agreements with range states and funding agencies.

In 2004, with the establishment of the Saint Louis Zoo WildCare Institute and the Saharan Wildlife Recovery Center, the Zoo was able to make a significant investment in the start-up costs to create such an entity, funding that led to the cultivation of additional zoos as supporters. Out of this, Sahara Conservation Foundation (SCF) was born, the first NGO devoted exclusively to wildlife conservation in the Sahara and its border with the short, dry grasslands of the Sahel.

Its first CEO, John Newby (7th from left in back row), became the voice for SCF. Bill Houston served as the voice of this Center until his retirement in 2024. Also in 2024, Tim Woodfine became the third CEO of Sahara



Sahara Conservation team members at a meeting in Morocco

Conservation (picture above 8th from left in back row), and Lisa Kelley, PhD, became the second Director of this center and serves on the US board of Sahara Conservation.

Location and Funding Prioritization

The Center's scope is to address the silent crisis of extinction underway in the Sahara Desert and its transitional zone, the short, dry grasslands of the Sahel, particularly in Chad and Niger. Sahara Conservation, which was once solely located in the United States with the Saint Louis Zoo as its financial headquarters, has expanded to form additional legal entities and offices in France, Chad and Niger (Figure 1).

Historically, the Center has focused its funding on priority projects specific to species including the scimitar-horned oryx, the addax, the dama gazelle, and the North African red-necked ostrich. However, in 2026 we have changed our funding model to focus on core operational support of strategic importance to the organization, including personnel and administrative costs necessary to carry out its conservation mission, and to support wildlife conservation strategies related to grant matching, reserve protection, applied conservation research, reintroduction, population survey and monitoring work, and/or capacity strength. This change was made to address the biggest funding needs of the organization.



Figure 1

Center Impact

The Big Wins

Chad: In July 2025, Sahara Conservation signed a historic renewable ten-year management agreement for the Ouadi Rimé– Ouadi Achim Faunal Reserve (OROAFR) with the Chadian Ministry of Environment, Fisheries and Sustainable Development. This public-private partnership marked a decisive step forward for the conservation of the largest protected area in Chad, and one of the largest in Africa. OROAFR is the only place on Earth where wild scimitar-horned oryx, addax and dama gazelles can be found together. The management of the reserve is not only vital for the future of these species and unique Sahelian biodiversity, but also for sustaining the rich human cultural value of the area as a remaining place of traditional pastoralism.



John Newby signing a historic 10-year public–private agreement with the Government of Chad for the management of Ouadi Rimé – Ouadi Achim Faunal Reserve

Niger: At the close of 2025, Sahara Conservation established a four-year project, Natur-OROA, through support and co-financed by the European Union as part of the NaturAfrica initiative. The program is designed to enhance protected area management in Gadabedji, Termit and Tin Toumma and Aír and Ténéré, with the goal to strengthen sustainable reserve management, biodiversity protection, community engagement and governance, with a particular focus on improving livelihoods for women and youth. The formal launch of this project occurred in February 2026, with high level participants in attendance, including 3 ministers, EU, World Bank, and UK Embassy representatives. The Provincial launch occurred in April 2026, with participation from local authorities and stakeholders and coverage by national television and local media.



Coverage of the launch of the NaturAfrica initiative in Niger

Other Notable Achievements

The scimitar-horned oryx population in the OROAFR has recovered from losses sustained during the extreme weather conditions of 2024. As of June 2026, the population estimate in the OROAFR is 650-750 individuals. Satellite tracking data and field observations at the start of the year further suggest a general movement of individuals from surrounding areas into the core zone near base camp. Notably, one of the individuals identified during the monitoring efforts was an individual released in 2016, indicating that released



Scimitar-horned oryx in the Ouadi Rimé-Ouadi Achim Faunal Reserve
Photo credit: Sahara Conservation

individuals are persisting.

The addax population is also showing encouraging progress following recent reintroduction efforts in the northern part of the OROAFR. Importantly, one group is heading towards the Ennedi Natural and Cultural Reserve, which hopefully will lead to populations connecting across the two landscapes. Based on monitoring in October 2025, the conservative estimate of addax in the reserve is 109 individuals.

In addition, two births were recorded in 2026, marking the first documented reproduction events within reintroduced groups in their historical desert habitat. This represents a particularly positive signal for the long-term restoration of the species.

The status of dama gazelles remains the most fragile amongst the Saharan antelope species. However, captive-bred dama gazelles released into the OROAFR in 2024 and in 2025 are doing well, with 11 of the 13 released animals showing signs of lactation. There are currently a further 27 animals in the captive breeding facility at Oryx Basecamp, with a birth recorded in early 2026.

In the Aír and Ténéré Reserve in Niger, six dama gazelles were observed directly during a monitoring expedition.



Reintroduced addax with historic wild-born calf
Photo credit: Khalid Rahama



Dama gazelle in the Ouadi-Rimé-Ouadi Achim Faunal Reserve
Photo credit: Sean Viljoen

Notable Media:

- The fall and rise of the Scimitar-horned oryx: a personal account - Part I: The fall - Gnusletter – June 2025
- The Oryx and I – BIAZA blog – August 2025
- Back from the brink: how zoos and monitoring are powering the return of the scimitar-horned oryx – BIAZA blog – August 2025
- Restoring wildlife to the Sahel and Sahara - Wilde Tracks newsletter – December 2025
- The fall and rise of the Scimitar-horned oryx: a personal account - Part II: the rise – Gnusletter – December 2025
- Wilder again - African – Fine art of Travel – December 2025
- Wild comeback: Extinct antelope now dancing again on the African plains - World's Best News – February 2026
- Sahara Conservation: The historic return of the Scimitar-Horned oryx to the Sahel as a symbol of global unity and national pride – Global Rewilding Alliance – March 2026
- How the Scimitar-horned oryx became a conservation unicorn - New Lines Magazine – April 2026

Publications

» [French only] Sahara Conservation au Tchad

» [French only] Combattre les feux de brousse dans la Réserve de Faune de Ouadi Rimé – Ouachi Achim

Scientific publication:

» Status and social structure of the critically endangered dama gazelle (*Nanger dama*) in the Aïr & Ténéré National Nature Reserve, Niger. November 2025

Stories from the Field

Barefoot on the Takolokouzet: A Mission for the Dama Gazelle Against All Odds

Written by: Abdoul Razack Moussa Zabeirou, Sahara Conservation's country representative in Niger

My first mission with Sahara Conservation, back in 2017, in the Aïr and Ténéré National Nature Reserve (ATNNR), remains one of the most defining moments of my career. As a project officer, I was on a mission to install camera traps on Mount Takolokouzet, a site as majestic as it is unforgiving, only accessible on foot. No vehicles can make the journey; only camels are able to carry the equipment, food, and water needed for several days of fieldwork.



Climbing the mountain—with our gear on camels and the mission ahead of us
Photo Credit: Sahara Conservation

For years, data on the dama gazelle (*Nanger dama*) in the ATNNR had been severely lacking, making targeted conservation action difficult. A 2014 mission had confirmed the species' presence in the area. The objective of our cameras was to document the distribution, numbers, and behavior of this iconic Sahelian species, listed as Critically Endangered on the IUCN Red List, in one of the last remaining strongholds of Saharan biodiversity.

It was my first field mission in this zone, and I felt both excited and overwhelmed by the scale of the challenge. The terrain was completely new to me, rugged, rocky, arid, with steep slopes and a harsh climate. Just a few hours after we set off on the first day, disaster struck: the soles of my shoes came unglued, and the fabric tore. They were unusable. I looked down at my feet, then up at the slopes ahead of us. We still had four days of hiking left.

It was a shock. No one else on the team had a spare pair, and turning back was not an option. I pushed on, wrapping my feet with whatever I could find—socks, rags, anything—step by step, across scorching, jagged rocks. Every step was painful. But I refused to give up. We were there for the dama gazelle. With caution and perseverance, I continued the mission. We successfully installed all the planned camera traps and carried out the follow-up work according to protocol.



Installing a camera trap during the mission
Photo Credit: Sahara Conservation

That experience shaped me physically and mentally, and it taught me an essential lesson for fieldwork: never underestimate the importance of gear, even the most basic one. Since that day, I've never gone on a mission without a spare pair of shoes in my backpack. It's a simple habit, forged through hardship, that has saved me many difficulties since.

Even today, every time I return to the Takolokouzet, I think back to that first mission. Not with bitterness, but with a deep sense of pride, pride in having overcome one of the toughest challenges of my career in service of a species as precious as the dama gazelle.



Dama gazelle on Mount Takolokouzet
Photo Credit: Sahara Conservation

Plans for the Future:

In 2026, the Zoo renewed its Memorandum of Understanding with Sahara Conservation to better support the shift in funding needs from programmatic to core operational support of strategic importance. This funding will better support current priority needs of Sahara Conservation, which include:

1) establishing a business plan and a fully functioning management team at Ouadi Rimé– Ouadi Achim Faunal Reserve (OROAFR)
2) implementation of NaturA-Niger, with prioritization on program mobilization and recruitment
3) further refinement of monitoring and intervention protocols for the Saharan ungulates
4) and pursuing ways to secure more core funding and matching funds for donor, foundation and grant support.

Partners

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