Antelope Specialist Group

I.U.C.N. S.S.C.

GNUSLETTER

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Edited by R. D. Estes, Chairman

So few of you have communicated with me since the January Gnusletter that I thought there would be little to report in this one. However, there turns out to be quite enough for one Gnusletter, so perhaps I shouldn't complain at the lack of response to my request for information from ASG members about research in progress, conservation problems relating to antelopes, personal news, etc. Never mind, I'll urge you once again to communicate with me and one another. As an inducement samples of the ASG aerogramme letterhead will be enclosed (I hope) with each Gnusletter. Write me and I'll send you some.

The Antelope Survey

More serious is the lack of progress on the antelope survey. Just two completed antelope inventory report forms have been returned to date. Most of you filled out the checklist Jane Thornback sent in the same packet as my letter and forms; that's a start. But the checklist provides none of the background that is needed to make an indepth survey of the antelopes. The form I worked out, if completed for major populations and subspecies, will provide the basis for a comprehensive report on the antelopes.

Unless we all make a concerted effort to get this survey off the ground right away, there will be no hope of publishing a book in 1983. Incidentally, each contribution will be duly acknowledged. Those of you who undertake to write summary accounts of a species, genus or tribe can have those accounts published as chapters in the book, if enough accounts are received to make it a collection of contributed papers. But we need commitments now as to who is going to do what. Please bear in mind that this is probably the single most important - and demanding - task the ASG will ever be called upon to perform.

AFRICA

Saharan Region

Dama Gazelle (Gazella dama). In the January Gnusletter there was a paragraph about a proposal to reintroduce this highly endangered gazelle to Senegal's Langue de Barbarie N. P. Out of concern for the mortality that often accompanies capture operations, I expressed the hope that zoo-bred

animals would be used. Mark Stanley Price, who is heading up the Arabian oryx reintroduction operation in Oman, comments as follows (in lit. 21 March, 1982):

"We now have quite a lot of experience of the time needed for zoo-bred antelopes to adapt reasonably to their native environment. On this basis a six month period in an enclosure would not possibly be adequate, even if it was large enough to contain largish areas of suitable vegetation types. I know nothing of the status nor distribution of this gazelle in Senegal, but I'm sure that translocation, if possible, would be cheaper and more likely to succeed."

Maybe I spoke out of turn, since I know very little about the status of the dama gazelle in the region. However, I would still question the logic of going to a viable wild population of an endangered species to get stock for translocation when the chances of these animals surviving and reproducing would be less than if they and their fellows had been simply left alone. The whole rationale for captive breeding rare animals is to maintain the species until it can be reintroduced as a wild animal. I have always felt that captive breeding should be attempted only as a last resort, and what Mark says reinforces that feeling. But what about the dama gazelles that are being bred in various zoos in the U.S., Europe and North Africa? Are their progeny good for nothing? Maybe there's some hope for them, since the Arabian oryx reintroduction seems to be going well (see under Near East).

Algeria

Gazella cuvieri, one of the rarest gazelles, is still holding its own and may even have increased in Algeria. K. De Smet of the Forestry Department estimates that between 200 and 500 survive in 17 different reserves, in eight of which he or colleagues personally counted or observed the gazelles. The Forestry Service is making important efforts to protect the species within and outside the State Forests, and not only hunting but all trade in souvenirs or parts of this species is prohibited. Yet poaching on a large scale remains a problem, especially when engaged in by highly placed officials.

This same species is the subject of an ethological study at the Rescue Center for Saharan Wildlife (Parque de Rescate de la Fauna Sahariana) in Almeria, Spain, where Juan Escos and Montserrat Gomendio are observing communication and behavior of three captive herds. They began the study two years ago.

Niger

The problem of the officials who are supposed to help enforce anti-poaching laws being the number-one offenders is hardly peculiar to Algeria. A letter to Lee Talbot from Bertrand des Clers, Director of the International Foundation for the Conservation of Game, dated 8 January, 1982, of which I received a copy, reports the shooting of a herd of 11 scimitar oryx and a herd of three addax by the Prefet of Zinder and the chef de poste at Tasker, respectively, in the Termit area of Niger.

Sudan

Chris Hillman and John Fryxall are continuing with their respective studies of the bongo and the ecology of the white-eared kob and other large mammals of the Boma N. P., which the New York Zoological Society is sponsoring. Judging from Chris's recent report to the NYZS, carrying on field work in his study area is no picnic. "Footwork in the forest over the past few months has not been very productive," he writes, "owing to the heavy rain and dense vegetation. The dominant grass flowered in September at 5 m height, after which it slowly collapsed in a tangled mass." Chris had also hoped to undertake a study of the Derby eland, but the prospects have dimmed partly due to the presence of mounted poachers armed with automatic weapons in his proposed study area.

John Fryxall, joined by his professor, Tony Sinclair, on sabattical leave, will be making several aerial surveys of Boma N. P. wildlife this year which should help to get a clearer picture of the seasonal movements of the kob, tiang, lelwel hartebeest, gazelles, zebra, etc. in relation to rainfall and pasture conditions. 1980 aerial surveys indicated that there are around 850,000 kob and over 100,000 tiang in the ecosystem.

Somalia

Dr. Alberto Simonetta, the well-known authority on Somali wildlife, has summarized his former and recent experience in a report entitled, An outline of the status of the Somali Fauna and of its conservation and management problems (in press), the ms of which I received from IUCN. Prof. Simonetta has also submitted a separate report on Somali antelopes in response to the ASG questionnaire, which taken together with his covering letter conveys a pretty gloomy picture of present conditions in Somalia, stemming at least partly from the continuing war with Ethiopia over the Ogaden. "... I must say that generally speaking the situation is very serious because A) of the lack of appropriate organization and trained officials; B) because of the vast numbers of automatic rifles which entered the country as the result of the continuing war along the Ethiopian border, the government being unable also for political reasons to control it; C) because the ever increasing cost of life makes it profitable to kill game.

"There is no lack of good will and a comprehensive appreciation of the situation has been drafted and will be improved during the next months; an entirely new legislation has been prepared and efforts to curb poaching are done. However a lot of help, especially on the technical side is needed."

Southern Africa

Angola

Whether I shall be going to Angola in July to check on the status of the giant sable is still uncertain, but I'm more optimistic now than I was a month ago. In the meanwhile I received a response to the letters I had written, beginning in November, from my English-speaking contact, a Danish Forester in the Ministry of Agriculture named Fritz Horsten, who is very much interested in conservation of the giant sable. He informed me that

the Director of the National Directorate of Nature Conservation still desired my visit and Horsten said my visa could be ready and waiting when I arrived. He also mentioned that FAO may help develop Cangandala National Park, the small northern reserve containing 100 or so sable. If the trip comes off I'll have more to say in the next Gnusletter. I'm leaving on 28 May to spend a month in the Serengeti before going to Angola.

NEAR EAST

Oman

In his letter of 21 March, Mark Stanley Price gave this encouraging news about the Arabian oryx reintroduction effort:

"Our Arabian Oryx project is having an exciting phase. We released our first herd from their 1 sq. km. enclosure on 31st January. The herd comprised 4 males, 4 females, a yearling female and female calf. They developed a home range steadily, with no mad rush to escape, and on 24th February the area had its first good rain for about 5 years! On the 25th we were visited by H.R.H. The Duke of Edinburgh as President of WWF, and so he saw the desert under water! The rain stimulated three of the females to come into oestrus, causing excursions by some animals of up to 20 kms. from camp, which was exciting. However, they always home back, but are usually tracked up first. There is now a good green growth developing, and two days ago the fourth and oldest female produced a calf. Although her second calf, the first being the yearling which I hand-reared, it is the first Arabian Oryx calf to be conceived in Oman and born in the wild for many years. The mother seems to be looking after it most attentively."

SOUTH ASIA

India

G. M. Oza, Chairman of the Asian Antelope Subgroup, managed to have a newsstory on the ASG Indian antelope survey and other IUCN activities published in the Indian Express (13 March, 1982). Favorable publicity of this kind can be very helpful for getting cooperation from bureaucrats and gaining local information about the wildlife from sources that would otherwise remain untapped.

South America

The survey of blackbuck in Argentina undertaken by Dr. J. E. Jackson was reported in the last Gnusletter. Soon after sending it off I received Dr. Jackson's results, complete with map showing the location of the known herds. An estimated minimum of 10,000 blackbuck live in Argentina with all the important populations in the Pampas. This total represents a probable two-thirds reduction since 1975, when an estimate of 30,000-35,000 was published in Wild und Hund (9/9/79). Heavy cropping on several large ranches where blackbuck are commercially utilized for meat and sport is the apparent cause of the reduction.

EDITORIAL DROPPINGS

Illigitimi Non Carborundum

Having to keep cool and be diplomatic no matter how outrageous the offenses we see committed against nature by people who should know better is the cross conservationists - like advocates of other unpopular or lost causes - have to bear.

Wouldn't it be appropriate for one of the more aggressive conservation groups like Greenpeace, the Sierra Club or the National Audubon Society to institute an annual listing of the year's most horrendous offenses against nature, to be released with enough of a flourish to be carried by all the wire services? There would be different categories of offenses (e.g. water and air pollution, ecosystem destruction, wanton wildlife destruction, "developments"). The worst offender in each category would receive testimonials framed for wall hanging and a suitable medal (e.g. a clear plastic replica of the Atlantic salmon filled with water from Lake Eerie for waterpollution, a passenger pigeon for wanton wildlife destruction). Those who directly contribute to the extermination of a species would have their names engraved for all time in a Doomsday chronicle or on plaques in a special building or hall devoted to Species Exterminated by Man.

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Addendum

Soon after I had finished the Gnusletter, I received a cable from the National Director of Nature Conservation that a visa would be waiting for me upon arrival in Angola. So my trip to check on the status of the giant sable is on.