

20th Sharjah International Conservation Forum for Arabia's Biodiversity

The 20th Annual Sharjah International Conservation Forum for Arabia's Biodiversity was held at the Breeding Centre for Endangered Arabian Wildlife in Sharjah, United Arab Emirates, during 4–7 February 2019. This Forum brought together over 200 participants from Bahrain, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Oman, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Yemen, and also Australia, France, Germany, Greece, New Zealand, Russia, South Africa, UK and the USA. The Sharjah workshops are hosted by the Environment and Protected Areas Authority of the Government of Sharjah, under the patronage of H.H. Sheikh Dr Sultan bin Mohammed al Qasimi, Member of the Supreme Council and Ruler of Sharjah.

The 20th meeting had four themes. A species assessment theme looked at reintroductions and other conservation translocations. The protected areas theme applied the IUCN *Global Standard for the Identification of Key Biodiversity Areas* to endemic plants and freshwater habitats across the Arabian Peninsula. The veterinary theme looked at conservation medicine in zoo and wild animals. A technical session looked at the use of drones for mapping for conservation management in the United Arab Emirates.

Forum delegates applied the IUCN *Guidelines for Reintroductions and Other Conservation Translocations* to 68 regional case studies, including reintroductions of Arabian oryx, Arabian and sand gazelles, houbara bustard, spiny-tailed lizard, and mangroves. Projects were also classified along a spectrum of management intervention, and the challenges facing future conservation translocations, including the issue of illegal hunting and harvest, were discussed.

Taxonomic and regional working groups applied the IUCN Key Biodiversity Area Standard to 44 species of threatened Arabian plants and freshwater species, including fish, molluscs and Odonata (dragonflies and damselflies), and identified 55 sites meeting a Key Biodiversity Area threshold.

The theme of conservation medicine was chosen as a culmination of the work covered during previous Sharjah meetings, and because it linked with the species theme of conservation translocations. For veterinarians working with large collections of animals, especially those that are threatened, the prospect of using some or all of the animals under their care for potential future reintroductions is a fascinating yet daunting prospect. Careful consideration was given to the role the veterinarian plays in pre-release site preparation, disease surveillance and risk analysis, transportation, off-loading, and the critical post-release monitoring period.

In the technical session a step-by-step process for using drones for mapping was presented, including hardware selection, software options, and data capture and analysis protocols. Delegates participated in a field demonstration using

mission-planning software to map vegetation inside and outside a protected area. Delegates also received a lecture, from David Gallacher of Zayed University, on the uses of drones in conservation, and current technological limitations and prospects for the future.

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Local democracy does not support conservation of an urban population of the European hamster *Cricetus cricetus*

In April 2019 in Lublin, a city of 340,000 inhabitants in eastern Poland, a local referendum was held, ordered by the City Council, concerning a change of development for a c. 105 ha green area, Górki Czechowskie, which has diverse wildlife and provides important ecosystem services. Until the 1990s the area was a military training site. The referendum concerned a proposal to use one-third of the area for new residences. The plan threatens the largest urban population of the European hamster *Cricetus cricetus* in Lublin, where a density of 1.57 burrows per ha has been recorded (R. Lopucki & A. Szelag, 2013, In *Studies of Animal Biology Ecology and Conservation in European Cities*, pp. 525–532, eds P. Indykiewicz et al., University of Science and Technology, Bydgoszcz, Poland).

Although categorized as Least Concern on the IUCN Red List, the European hamster is protected in many European countries, and listed in Appendix II of the Bern Convention and in Appendices II and IV of the EU Habitats Directive. The species is also threatened in Poland: its range has decreased by 90% since 1970 (Ziomek et al., 2018, *Conservation Program for the European Hamster Cricetus cricetus (Linnaeus, 1758) in Poland*, Salamandra, Poznan, Poland). Sixty-eight per cent of residents voting in the referendum did not support development on the disputed area but

the problem remains unresolved because only 12.9% of residents participated (the result can only be binding if at least 30% of eligible voters participate). The decision regarding Górkí Czechowskie now lies with the city authorities, and this urban population of the hamster thus remains at risk.

The referendum demonstrates that democratic procedures are not necessarily a guarantee of nature conservation, and raises the question of whether a referendum is an appropriate democratic tool for resolving conflicts between urban development and nature conservation. Rather, it may be more appropriate that central government should participate in resolving such issues. This would fulfil the obligation of national responsibility (*sensu* Schmeller et al., 2018, *Conservation Biology*, 22, 593–601) for the protection of the hamster.

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The Whitley Awards 2019

The 2019 Whitley Awards Ceremony was held on 1 May 2019 at the Royal Geographical Society in London. The flagship event of UK-based charity, the Whitley Fund for Nature (WFN), was hosted by wildlife presenter and WFN ambassador Kate Humble. The evening saw six conservation leaders, from six countries, receive Whitley Awards of GBP 40,000 each in support of their conservation work. In addition the prestigious Whitley Gold Award of GBP 60,000 was presented to 2003 Whitley Award winner

Jon Paul Rodríguez of Provita, Venezuela, for his work to conserve yellow-shouldered parrots throughout their range.

Over 500 people attended the event, where the charity's patron, HRH The Princess Royal, presented the Awards. The 2019 Whitley Award Winners are: Caleb Ofori Boateng, Ghana (Critical refuge for the Togo slippery frog); Nikolai Petkov, Bulgaria (Wetlands on the brink: conserving the red-breasted goose); Vatosoa Rakotondrazafy, Madagascar (MIHARI: a civil society movement to safeguard marine resources); José Hernán Sarasola, Argentina (The Chaco eagle: a flagship for semi-arid wildlife conservation); Wendi Tamariska, Indonesia (Protecting orangutans and rainforests through sustainable livelihoods); Ilena Zanella, Costa Rica (Strengthened sanctuary for the scalloped hammerhead shark).

Over its 26 years the charity has given over GBP 16 million in conservation funding to more than 200 conservation leaders in over 80 countries. An early pioneer in the sector, the Whitley Award was one of the first awards given in recognition of effective conservation leadership in the Global South. Twenty-six years on, the need for recognition of grassroots leadership has never been stronger. The Whitley Fund for Nature supports emergent conservation leaders who are nationals of the countries where they work, making them best placed to lead change and articulate solutions. Through them WFN supports work rooted in communities that is pragmatic, science-based, and has lasting impact.

For more information on the Whitley Fund for Nature, the Whitley Awards and to view short films about each of the winning projects, see whitleyaward.org. See p. 592 for the call for applications for the 2020 Whitley Awards.

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