

The Rapid Response Facility: tackling conservation emergencies in Africa and beyond

The Rapid Response Facility for World Heritage Sites in danger has had a successful first year. An innovative collaboration between Fauna & Flora International, UNESCO and the UN Foundation, the Facility (introduced in *Oryx*, 40, 1–2) is an emergency small grants programme that provides funds to support Natural World Heritage Sites facing acute threats to the biodiversity for which they were inscribed. The emphasis is on Rapid, with the partners making decisions about grants within 8 working days of receiving applications, and aiming to have funds on the ground within 3 weeks.

Launched in 2006 as a 2-year pilot initiative, the Facility offers small grants of up to USD 30,000. To date, six grants have been awarded to support emergency conservation work in highly threatened Heritage Sites. The issues being tackled by these grants have been many and varied, from emergency fire management in Emas National Park, Brazil, to support for a dynamic network of local environmental NGOs fighting road construction plans in Kerinci-Seblat National Park, Indonesia.

One country where Natural World Heritage Sites have been under particular pressure in the last 12 months is the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). DRC is home to five Heritage Sites, all listed by UNESCO as In Danger due to armed conflict. In its first year the Facility awarded emergency small grants to three of these sites. At Garamba National Park the focus has been on protection of the remaining population of the Critically Endangered northern white rhino, and with it the World Heritage status of the Park, by increasing the capacity of ranger units to combat poaching. With the rhino population in Garamba down to an estimated four individuals and with an inexperienced and overstretched ranger force, the situation had reached crisis point.

The rehabilitation of the Ishango training camp in Virunga National Park enabled the Frankfurt Zoological Society to train 60 of Garamba's rangers in anti-poaching and law enforcement. To ensure security was maintained during the training period, 31 rangers from Virunga National Park travelled to Garamba to protect the area in the interim. The training gives

rangers a better chance of achieving their mandate in a challenging environment. The Rapid Response Facility grant made this training possible, and it is hoped that this investment in capacity-building will create a lasting legacy of enhanced wildlife protection in Garamba.

Another grant, awarded to Virunga National Park, also focused on anti-poaching support. In late 2006, following presidential elections, the security situation in the Park took a turn for the worse with the escalation of violent fighting in eastern DRC. Three ranger outposts in the Park were looted and the park staff forced to flee. Then, in January 2007, two silverback mountain gorillas *Gorilla beringei beringei* were killed by armed groups within days of each other. The International Gorilla Conservation Programme immediately approached the Rapid Response Facility and a grant was awarded to contribute to emergency humanitarian support for the Park staff and their families and to fund rehabilitation of the damaged ranger posts. This rapid response is helping to avoid a security vacuum that could otherwise result in additional habitat destruction and further deaths of mountain gorillas.

Lastly, in Salonga National Park, a growing climate of hostility between local communities and the state authority mandated to protect the Park led WWF-DRC to submit an application to the Rapid Response Facility to support conflict resolution activities. A high profile meeting took place in Monkoto, a town within the Park, in early September, which succeeded in defusing tensions that had developed and also marked the first time a provincial Governor had been to Monkoto in over 30 years. In the long-term it is hoped that participatory consultation frameworks established to resolve further conflicts will provide a more secure future for Salonga.

The Rapid Response Facility has proved that rapid response is possible, and that this can yield immediate benefits for World Heritage conservation. It is currently open to applications at any time until August 2007, and the partners are fundraising to extend the facility into 2008 and beyond. For information on how to apply for a small grant visit <http://www.fauna-flora.org/rrf>, or send an enquiry to the Rapid Response Facility Secretariat at rrf@fauna-flora.org

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Village forest set aside for sustainable harvesting

A new Village Land Forest Reserve covering 454 ha of miombo woodland is to be declared at Kikole Village in Kilwa District, south-eastern Tanzania. Its establishment has been facilitated by the Mpingo Conservation Project working in conjunction with the government programme of Participatory Forest Management. The Mpingo Conservation Project aims to use East African blackwood *Dalbergia melanoxylon* as a flagship species to conserve endangered Tanzanian forests and woodlands that lie outside existing protected areas. Sustainable harvesting of blackwood, which is used to make musical instruments such as clarinets and oboes, and other valuable hardwoods under community management will bring in significant income to communities, thereby giving them an incentive to care for the forest habitat. Thus far the Project has focused its work in four pilot villages in Kilwa District, a major timber harvesting area. Kikole is the first of the pilot villages to have a management plan and associated by-laws for a Village Land Forest Reserve approved by the District Council, thereby legally ensuring its status as reserved land and signifying a considerable step forward for both biodiversity conservation and poverty mitigation in the area.

Timber tree stocks in the Village Land Forest Reserve were assessed under a procedure known as Participatory Forest Resource Assessment, designed to give communities a real sense of ownership over their local forest resources. The management plan, which lasts 5 years, allows harvesting only of those species with healthy populations and size distributions, of which blackwood is the most common. Prior to the Project's arrival communities were receiving as little as USD 0.08 per log, but under Participatory Forest Management communities are entitled to retain logging licence fees worth up to USD 8 per log in the case of blackwood, an increase of 10,000%, and a significant financial boost in an area where the average rural household income is <USD 0.50 per day. Awareness raising by the Project has in some cases led to loggers being turned away in Kikole and other villages, pending establishment of Village Land Forest Reserves, and to villagers demanding a higher fee from loggers in other cases. However communities will have to compete against unregulated logging in general lands, and so to lock in these higher prices the Kikole Village Land Forest Reserve and others in process will be certified according to Forest Stewardship Council guidelines. In this way musicians in the UK and elsewhere can make informed choices when purchasing a new instrument, and opt to buy instruments labelled as being made from ethically sourced timber.

Kikole Village has already begun to reap the benefits of the Village Land Forest Reserve. They received compensation of *c.* USD 600 from an oil prospecting company that felled a number of trees within the Reserve in the process of laying out a seismic line. This has encouraged the community regarding the potential benefits of Participatory Forest Management, highlighted by the absence of compensation for trees felled outside the Reserve. Consequently, the community has adopted a pro-active attitude. Members of their Village Natural Resource Committee patrol the forests three times per month, collecting to date almost USD 150 in fines for illegal activity. Checkpoints for forest products have recently been completed at each end of the track that passes through the Reserve. These activities are an important element of maintaining the integrity of the forest. According to members of the community there has been a decrease in movement of people within the forests surrounding the village since the instigation of forest patrols, suggesting that patrols have begun to have the desired effect of deterring illegal activity. Furthermore, they report increased occurrence of wild animals, such as bush pigs and monkeys, the first indication of positive biodiversity impact within the Reserve. The Project plans to incorporate wildlife monitoring into the forest patrols and thereby obtain quantitative evidence of such changes.

The benefits that Kikole Village has received so far has given the community the confidence to further their involvement in Participatory Forest Management, exemplified by their decision to create a second, much larger Village Land Forest Reserve, covering at least 5,000 ha of timber-rich forest, which they are in the process of demarcating. A neighbouring village, Kisangi Kimbarambara, has followed suit and recently extended their proposed Village Land Forest Reserve to include an area containing considerably more timber stocks. Enlarging the forest reserves will not only benefit the community by providing a greater stock of potentially certifiable timber, but will also provide important havens for wildlife.

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Arabian conservation workshops

During 30 January to 1 February 2007 the 8th International Conservation Workshop for the Fauna of Arabia was convened at the Breeding Centre for Endangered Arabian Wildlife in Sharjah, UAE, under the auspices of the Environment and Protected Areas Authority and the patronage of HH Sheikh Dr Sultan

bin Mohammed Al Qassimi. This meeting marked a significant departure from the format of previous workshops. Since 2000 the focus of annual meetings has been on the compilation of information necessary to make Red List assessments and to formulate regional and national conservation action plans for native Arabian fauna. It became evident through the management planning exercises that a common issue relevant to the conservation of all wildlife in the Arabian Peninsula was the need to provide suitable areas of habitat sufficient to support viable wildlife populations. The theme of the 8th meeting was therefore protected areas in Arabia.

Through a combination of formal presentations and facilitated working groups delegates from UAE, Saudi Arabia, Oman, Bahrain, Yemen, Qatar, Jordan and Lebanon pooled their collective experience to consider four related topics: (1) Protected area creation and management, the primary focus, where the progress made by several countries in the region provide useful models of the application of IUCN categories for the establishment of protected area networks that take into account biodiversity hotspots, threatened and relict species, and the protection of representative examples of relatively intact ecosystems. (2) Nature-based tourism, which can make important contributions towards the sustainable management of selected protected areas. Again the experience of the countries represented provided examples of best practice and lessons concerning the ways to integrate tourism development with reserve management to ensure that benefits are realized whilst minimizing impacts. (3) Local community involvement in protected area creation and management, which was considered essential as an alternative to the socially unsustainable exclusion of people from culturally important landscapes. In some cases Western-derived approaches to protected area establishment may not be appropriate in Arabia, particularly where the intent of the secular concept of *mahmiyah* may be misconstrued as 'areas protected from people'. One exciting complement to the more conventional approaches could be the restoration of the ancient Islamic concept of *hima*, an area set aside specifically for the sustainable use of natural resources by and for local communities. (4) Transfrontier conservation cooperation, which may be the topic of greatest future importance for the Arabian Peninsula. There are a number of situations where existing or proposed protected areas lie on the borders between two or more countries (or Emirates in the case of the UAE). Complementary cross-border protection would significantly enhance the conservation value of such protected areas, facilitating the natural movements of migratory species and creating a focus for meaningful international

cooperation. One recommendation from the meeting was that the 9th Conservation Workshop should consider Arabian transborder conservation cooperation opportunities in detail.

The Workshop was preceded by a 3-day planning meeting for the Critically Endangered Arabian leopard *Panthera pardus nimr*. The Arabian leopard has been a prominent topic at all previous Sharjah conservation workshops, culminating in production of a range-wide status report published by the IUCN/Species Survival Commission Cat Specialist Group and the Sharjah Environment and Protected Areas Authority. The 2007 meeting brought together experts from the range states to formulate a conservation strategy for endorsement by their governments. The range-wide strategy agreed at the meeting will provide the basis for development of national action plans for the Arabian leopard.

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Conservation news from Lower Choper Nature Park, Russia

Four years have passed since the establishment in 2003 of the Lower Choper Nature Park in Russia (see *Oryx*, 37, 17). This, the largest park in Volgograd region, covers c. 2,312 km². From the beginning the main aims of the Park have been the conservation of the region's biodiversity, and use of the Park for scientific, tourist and educational activities, and for use of some wild plant resources.

With the help of a Rufford Small Grant the threatened flora was studied in June–July 2005, and again in spring and summer 2006, including visits to the remote northern areas of the Park in Nekhaevsky administrative district. A list of the vascular plants of the Park is being compiled and includes c. 1,300 species. Amongst these a large number of rare plant species have been recorded, probably due to the minimal anthropological influences in the area and the diversity of the natural landscapes of the Lower Choper region. Twenty-four plant species in the 1988 Red Data Book of Russia have been found in the Park, and in addition other rare species have been discovered that are not yet included in the Red List, such as the rare orchid *Dactylorhiza incarnata* and a rare variety with white flowers, *D. incarnata* var. *ochroleuca*.

Shakinskaya Dubrava (Shakinsky oak wood) in Kumilzhensky district is particularly interesting from the floristic point of view. The presence of an extensive forest in an area of steppe has resulted in a diverse flora. The number of plant species recorded from this area is more than 500, with 13 of the species being in the Red Data Book of the Volgograd region.

The presence of *Rubus saxatilis* was confirmed in Dubrava, and the rare *Carex bohémica*, originally known in the Volgograd region only from the area of the Medveditsa River, was discovered, as was *Rumex acetoselloides*, a new species for the Volgograd region. During the recent surveys places with unique plant communities and concentrations of rare and threatened species were examined: the salt water meadow along the Buzuluk River near khutor Pomalinsky, with large populations of *Fritillaria meleagroides* and *Serratula lycopiifolia*, chalk hills near stanitsa Lukovskaya with a rich complex of chalk flora including *Artemisia hololeuca*, *Alyssum lenense* and *Clausia aprica*, and forested floating islands in the Babinsky Lakes near stanitsa Alexeevskaya.

The Park contains some unique ecosystems, including areas of virgin steppe on black soils, sandy steppe, chalk

denudations along the banks of the Choper and Buzuluk Rivers, upland and ravine forests, forests along rivers, floodplain meadows, and the aquatic flora of numerous lakes and rivers. All of these ecosystems are particularly sensitive to anthropogenic influences and need to be carefully monitored.

Originally six nature parks were established in the Volgograd region (see *Oryx*, 38, 135) and in August 2006 we participated in the establishment of the Ust-Medveditsky Nature Park, at the town of Serafimovitch, where the Medveditsa River joins the Don. All seven parks in the Volgograd region now work in close collaboration with each other.

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