

# CONSERVATION ENDOWMENT FUND

Studying and Protecting the Last Wild Population of Slender-horned Gazelles in the Algerian Great Western Erg



The slender-horned gazelle (*Gazella leptoceros loderi*) is endemic to Saharan sand dune habitats (ergs) and is now endangered due to uncontrolled hunting. In Algeria, the government has initiated several measures including environmental protection laws and captive breeding programs to reinforce wild gazelle populations in the Great Western Erg. Along with these efforts, the Smithsonian Conservation Biology Institute and the Sahara Conservation Fund (SCF) have been collaborating with the Algerian Ministry of Agriculture since 2007 to better understand the basic ecology of the slender-horned gazelle and train Algerian conservation professionals in survey and monitoring techniques.



Several field missions (including one funded by the Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA) Conservation Endowment Fund (CEF) in 2010) have demonstrated that relict gazelle populations were found at low densities in temporary stream beds and desert dunes in the entire Great Western Erg. However, the largest populations are likely living in the most inaccessible central areas of the erg. Fecal samples from gazelle latrines and resting areas were collected during the different surveys, and genetic testing is underway to delineate the taxonomy and genetic diversity of the gazelle

populations. Other animal species also have been regularly identified by using camera traps, observing tracks and collecting scats (e.g., Libyan striped weasel, caracal, wild cat, porcupine, fennec, and Ruppell's fox).

In addition, Houbara bustards were observed to be widely distributed across the erg. A systematic mapping of the presence of vegetation and wildlife has enabled us to identify several core habitats that will be the focus of future scientific and conservation actions. With multiple stakeholder support, including from AZA, we have trained 15 Algerian biologists to systematically inventory critical desert fauna and flora using methods developed and validated by the experts from the SCF. As a result, wild populations of slender-horned gazelles, as well as the natural habitat they require, stand a better chance of long-term survival. ■



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