Overview of the status of large fauna in the West African savannah region and its ecological history

David Mallon, Co-Chair, IUCN/SSC Antelope Specialist Group

The West African savanna extends for over 1,600,000 km2 across 12 countries, from the Atlantic coast to Cameroon. It lies to the north of the West African rainforest zone and consists of dense deciduous woodland in the south, becoming more open towards the north, before grading into the arid grasslands of the Sahel. The region is much less well-known, at least in the English-speaking world, than similar habitats in East Africa.

The West African savanna contained a rich fauna including most of the familiar savanna species, such as elephant, black rhino, hippo, buffalo, lion, cheetah, African wild dog, giraffe and many species of antelopes. The rhino disappeared a decade ago. The other large species have undergone drastic reductions in range and numbers, and survive mainly in national parks and reserves. Protected areas cover around 6% of the zone and have become islands of natural woodland and grassland in a sea of degraded habitats devoid of large and medium sized wild species.

The major factors in these declines are hunting and habitat destruction due to conversion of extensive areas of original habitat to agriculture and overgrazing. The region is under tremendous pressure from the needs of a rapidly growing human population: 337 million in 2013 and projected to reach 800 million by 2050 and more than 1.5 billion in 2100. Several countries are classed by the United Nations as Least Developed Countries so governments have a difficult task balancing the demands of biodiversity conservation alongside economic growth and finding land to house and feed their populations. Despite these considerable pressures, there is an excellent track record of civil society organizations and international NGOs supporting wildlife conservation and protected areas in the region.

David Mallon is an Associate Lecturer at Manchester Metropolitan University’s Division of Biology and Conservation Ecology, has been Co-Chair of IUCN Antelope Specialist Group since 2004 and is a ZSL Conservation Fellow. He has been working in international conservation for over 25 years and was a member of a small team that prepared a detailed analysis of the status of the the fauna of West and Central Africa in 2014.
The WAP complex, an example of trans-boundary conservation in an intact remnant of West African savannah

Audrey Ipavec, ZSL Coordinator for the Range Wide Conservation Program for Cheetah and African Wild dogs, Northern, Western and Central Africa

Large fauna across West Africa have suffered huge declines in the last 40 years. The W-Arly-Pendjari (WAP) conservation complex is the last relatively intact savannah ecosystem in West Africa. This truly transboundary landscape spanning Benin, Burkina Faso and Niger covers a continuous area of almost 35,000 km². Including a network of protected areas, buffer zones, community lands and hunting concessions, the WAP complex offers an exceptional island of biodiversity, absolutely unique in West Africa.

With the largest population of the critically endangered West African lion, the last population of cheetah in the region and over 70% of the remaining West African elephant population, this site is of critical importance for the conservation of several Sahelo-Sudanese mammalian species. The Zoological Society of London (ZSL), together with its partner, Panthera, has identified the WAP as an urgent conservation priority and has been actively supporting the Benin wildlife authorities to protect the Pendjari and the W National Parks in Benin since mid-2015. The Range Wide Conservation Program for Cheetah and African Wild Dogs (RWCP), with the full buy-in of Benin, Burkina Faso and Niger governments, also selected the WAP as the cheetah landscape of highest importance in the Northern, Western and Central Africa.

Audrey Ipavec is a wildlife ecologist who has been working in Southern and Western African savanna ecosystems since 1999. Resident in Burkina Faso, Benin and Niger, West Africa, from 2002 to 2009, she obtained a PhD studying elephant population distribution in the W Regional Park the she has been lecturing on ecology and human wildlife conflict until the end of 2013, when she joined the RWCP team (Range Wide Conservation Program for cheetah and African wild dogs) as the regional coordinator in Northern, Western and Central Africa, based in Benin.

Mali’s remarkable “desert-adapted” elephants: how they have survived and how they can be conserved

Susan Canney, University of Oxford and WILD Foundation

Africa's northern-most herd of “desert-adapted” elephants makes the longest and most unusual elephant migration in the world over an area of around 32,000km (larger than Belgium and just smaller than Switzerland) just south of Timbuktu in the remote Gourma region of Mali.

This talk will shed light on how these elephants have survived when all around them have disappeared and describe how understanding their migration, behaviour and ecology, coupled with understanding their relationship with the local people of the area, led to a successful model of human-elephant co-existence for mutual benefit. It will attempt to convey the roller-coaster of trying to conserve and protect elephants in a sub-desert environment suffering from a jihadist insurgency on top of increasing human pressure, land degradation, and an all-out assault by international trafficking networks. Mali has been described as the United Nations “most dangerous peace-keeping mission”, and yet the Mali Elephant Project has continued to operate throughout, because of its emphasis on local empowerment and its rootedness in the local natural and social context.
Susan Canney is the Director of the Mali Elephant Project, a joint initiative of the WILD Foundation and the International Conservation Fund of Canada. She had previously worked on a variety of nature conservation projects in Africa, Asia and Europe, and as a policy researcher at the Green College Centre for Environmental Policy & Understanding. She is a Research Associate of the Department of Zoology at the University of Oxford, a Trustee of Tusk Trust, a member of the African Elephant Specialist Group, and has co-authored a recently published book on "Conservation" for Cambridge University Press, which takes a global perspective to bring conservation to the heart of sustainability and environmental policy.

Chair: Paul De Ornellas, Africa Programme Manager and Lead on Illegal Wildlife Trade, ZSL

Paul De Ornellas is the programme manager for Africa and Lead on Illegal Wildlife Trade at ZSL. Following an early career as a veterinary surgeon in the UK, and field researcher in Indonesia Paul joined ZSL in 2010. During his time at the society he has worked on projects across the Africa programme with an emphasis on West and Central Africa. He has a major interest in species conservation in particular those species adversely affected by trade including elephants, great apes, large carnivores and pangolins. In 2014 he co-organised United for Wildlife symposium on Illegal Wildlife Trade, hosted at ZSL and since then has played a major role developing the IWT theme at ZSL; supporting in situ wildlife protection and law enforcement in Africa and leading policy engagement at CITES for the society.