

Niger turns to drones to protect precious wildlife

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The Saharan Addax antelope, native to southeastern Niger, faces extinction

Niger is turning to drone technology to help protect a Saharan antelope and other endangered species in Africa's largest terrestrial park.

The Termit and Tin Toumma reserve in the southeast of the West African desert state is at threat from poaching, deforestation, over-grazing and armed conflict.

French conservation group Noe—its name means "Noah"—will provide drone surveillance under a 20-year agreement to manage the reserve.

Noe's secretary general, Valerie Collin, signed the agreement on Monday with Environment Minister Almoustapha Garba.

Bazoum Mohamed, the former French colony's interior minister, said drones would be used to help monitor the animals, which include the critically endangered Saharan addax antelope, the dama gazelle and the Saharan sub-species of the cheetah.

"The park's fauna is still there but is badly threatened," said Collin.

The region's Dorcas gazelle and Barbary sheep are listed as vulnerable, while the Arabian bustard and fennec fox are other protected species to be found in the reserve, along with around a hundred plant species.

Created in 2012, the Termit and Tin Toumma stretches over 97,000 square kilometres (37,500 square miles)—more than three times the size of Belgium.

Part of the park is in the Lake Chad Basin, a region beset by deadly incursions by the Islamist group Boko Haram based in neighbouring Nigeria.

A massive oil-extraction project has also been blamed for encroaching on the land on which the rare addax antelope forages for sparse shrubs and herbs.

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