

National Zoo scimitar-horned oryx going into the wild

4 March 2008



These four scimitar-horned oryx are among the nine that were returned in December 2007 to Tunisia, where they have been extinct since the late 1970s. A male oryx from the Smithsonian's National Zoo's Conservation and Research Center in Front Royal, Va., was included in the group. The animals will eventually be reintroduced into the wild. Credit: Tim Wachter

A male scimitar-horned oryx from the Smithsonian's National Zoo's Conservation and Research Center in Front Royal, Va., is playing an important role in ensuring the species does not vanish from the planet.

The oryx, along with eight others from American and European zoos, was sent to Tunisia in December 2007 for an eventual reintroduction into the wild, where they have been extinct since the late 1970s. Oryx are a type of desert antelope that are mostly white with reddish-brown necks and marks on the face and a long, dark, tufted tail. They stand up to 4 feet and 6 inches tall at the shoulder, and both male and female oryx have curved horns that grow to be several feet long.

Although the animals have been returned to Tunisia, scientists cannot just simply release them into the wild. For now, the oryx are being kept in a 20,000-acre fenced area in the Dghoumes

National Park. Within this protected zone, the five males and four females will reproduce and become acclimated to their arid surroundings. Once a sustainable population has been established, possibly a decade or so from now, the fences will come down.

Oryx were once common in the wild. As recently as 1900, there were as many as 1 million of them in North Africa. But their numbers began to dwindle as they were hunted, both for sport and food. To ensure that the same problems do not plague the oryx that are being reintroduced into the wild, the Tunisian government is planning conservation programs to educate local people about the importance of protecting the animals.

The plan to send oryx to Tunisia came about after that country approached the Association of Zoos and Aquariums, the European Association of Zoos and Aquariums, and the Secretariat for the Convention on Migratory Species for help. Population managers for oryx decided which of the animals were the most genetically valuable to send to Tunisia.

Oryx from the National Zoo's Conservation and Research Center, the Kansas City Zoo, the Fossil Rim Wildlife Center in Texas, The Wilds in Ohio and Texas' Bamberger Ranch joined oryx from Fota Wildlife Park in Ireland and France's Le Pal Parc Animalier et D'Attractions in Tunisia in December 2007. The National Zoo's oryx will provide a significant infusion of valuable genes into the reintroduced population.

Scientists at the National Zoo's Conservation and Research Center also are continuing important research to help find ways to better manage scimitar-horned oryx, both in the wild and in zoos. National Zoo scientists pioneered artificial insemination techniques for oryx in order to ensure that genetically valuable but behaviorally incompatible pairs could reproduce.

Two oryx are on exhibit at the National Zoo, and several more oryx remain at the Conservation and Research Center.

Source: Smithsonian

APA citation: National Zoo scimitar-horned oryx going into the wild (2008, March 4) retrieved 27 November 2022 from <https://phys.org/news/2008-03-national-zoo-scimitar-horned-oryx-wild.html>

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