



IUCN SPECIES SURVIVAL COMMISSION SPECIALIST GROUP CHAIRS' MEETING Al Ain, United Arab Emirates, 11-14 February 2008

MEETING REPORT EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The first-ever meeting of the IUCN Species Survival Commission (SSC) Specialist Group (SG) Chairs, generously sponsored by the Environment Agency – Abu Dhabi, took place on 11-14 February 2008 at the Hilton Hotel in Al Ain, United Arab Emirates. Co-sponsors for the meeting were the SSC, Conservation International and D. Swarovski & Co. The meeting was attended by 122 delegates: over 80 SG Chairs, key IUCN staff from Headquarters and IUCN Regional Offices, as well as colleagues from other IUCN Commissions.

The meeting honoured the SG Chairs and members who have given so much of their voluntary time and energy to the IUCN, SSC and species conservation over the years. The meeting provided opportunities for the SG Chairs to share their experiences with each other and discuss cross-cutting conservation issues, as well as a platform for learning and capacity building that will ensure the persistence of the cumulative SSC knowledge into the future.

Meeting Objectives

In planning the meeting, the design team identified five main objectives. With these objectives in mind, the 60 sessions of the four day meeting agenda can be summarised into the following main sections:

1. ***The future of species conservation:***

- Provocative presentations and discussions on whether the conservation of species does actually still matter and whether it is high enough on the global agenda.

2. ***The role of SSC in IUCN and beyond:***

- Presentations and discussions on what IUCN, its Regional Offices and Thematic Programmes, the SSC, and the Species Programme actually do, how they link and further opportunities for collaboration.
- Presentations, table discussions as well as question and answer sessions on setting the context for the future of SSC and the proposed "Design for the Future".
- Question and answer sessions on species policy challenges and politics.
- The World Conservation Congress (WCC) – Barcelona, October 2008.

3. ***Expanding and sharing knowledge:***

- Presentations on the practicalities of Red Listing, and the priorities and uses of the IUCN Red List.
- Presentations and discussion on future ideas for species conservation planning and implementing action.
- Presentations and discussions on how to strengthen messages regarding the relevance of species through enhancing our internal and external communications.

4. ***Discussing our common challenges:***

- Sharing experiences on funding and fundraising.
- Sharing experiences on establishing and managing an effective network.

5. ***A positive and lasting experience:***

Although this objective was more general, numerous aspects of the meeting design ensured a positive, fun and memorable experience for those attending.

The sessions were conducted through presentations, small group discussions, plenary discussions, and panel question and answer sessions. The meeting was also designed to be as interactive as possible with the delegates seated at tables of 10 as opposed to in lecture theatre-style; and the delegates given the freedom to become as involved as they wished in the discussions and through fun activities like capturing ideas on cards, drawing diagrams, placing dots on the world map and completing a timeline on the wall.

One of the main requests from the SG Chairs before the meeting was that there would be ample time for informal interaction. Although it was incredibly difficult with such a packed agenda, the meeting organisers did their best to ensure that the tea and lunch breaks were as long as possible. The Hilton Hotel Al Ain also went out of their way to make the meeting a positive experience for the delegates by providing private breakfasts and luncheons, private meetings rooms and generally trying to accommodate every need.

Additional Meeting Features

It was a great privilege to have such an involved and considerate meeting host. The Secretary General of the Environment Agency – Abu Dhabi, His Excellency Majid Al Mansouri, personally attended the afternoon session on conservation in the UAE, accompanied by colleagues who gave presentations on various conservation initiatives. In addition to sponsoring most of the flights, all of the accommodation and catering, airport transfers and the hire of the meeting rooms, the Environment Agency provided a bag for each delegate containing a 2008 calendar, a diary and a DVD about the UAE. They also presented each delegate with a coffee-table book on the natural history of the UAE and a hardback guide to the wildflowers of the UAE, in addition to other pamphlets. The Environment Agency also arranged for a half-day field trip, taking delegates to the National Avian Research Centre (where Houbara Bustards are bred), the release site of the Arabian oryx reintroduction, or for a shopping and sight-seeing trip to Dubai.

The Al Ain Zoo hosted an outdoor Gala Dinner at the zoo on the first evening of the meeting, which was attended by His Highness Sheikh Sultan Bin Tahnoon Al Nahyan, Chairman of the Abu Dhabi Tourism Authority; His Excellency Mohammed Ahmed Al Bawardi, Secretary General – Abu Dhabi Executive Council; and His Excellency Majid Al Mansouri, Secretary General of the Environment Agency.

At the close of the meeting SSC Chair, Dr Holly Dublin, presented a number of fun awards to delegates who were particularly noticeable during the meeting. She also presented Dr Russell Mittermeier with the “senior” SSC award, the Sir Peter Scott Award for Conservation Merit, in recognition of his enduring commitment to the conservation of species and his dedication to the SSC for more than three decades.

Meeting Outputs

Overall, the first-ever meeting of the SSC Specialist Group Chairs was a great success. All the delegates learned important lessons about best practice in fundraising, networking and communications; they took home with them a better sense of the larger SSC and IUCN network; and, most of all, they celebrated the achievements of the SSC over the last 59 years.

Each delegate was asked to complete a Feedback Form at the end of the meeting. In the comments section of the Feedback Form (where delegates could write anything that came to mind), the primary comments were ones of praise about the meeting – the three most frequently used words to describe their experience were “informative”, “inspiring” and “fun”. Many of the respondents requested that the meeting become a regular occurrence. Other frequent comments included how beneficial it was for them to meet other SG Chairs and the representatives from the IUCN Regional Offices, how interesting it was to learn more about IUCN and how they could build synergies for greater conservation impact, and their feeling that they would become a more effective Chair as a result of this meeting.

The action items from the meeting can be divided into two broad categories: a) those to be undertaken by the SG Chairs and b) those that need further deliberation by the leadership of

the SSC and the Species Programme regarding better defining the action, identifying the responsible party and giving a timeframe for delivery. The action items for the SG Chairs included pursuing possible resolutions to be put forward to the WCC, ensuring that the Species Programme is aware of their fundraising needs, and sharing positive stories and case studies with the SSC/Species Programme Communications Team for the website or press releases. Action items for the leadership of the SSC and Species Programme are numerous and include items such as providing more information about communications tools; facilitating better networking possibilities between SG Chairs (particularly for new Chairs); providing examples of IUCN policies that affect the SG Chairs; and collating more information on good fundraising practices and disseminating this information to the whole SSC network.

Delegates also detailed personal action items in their meeting Feedback Forms in terms of their specific Specialist Group. The most commonly expressed personal action items included better communication with other parts of IUCN, restructuring within their SG for better functionality, improving communications within their SG (including ensuring that all their members receive feedback about the SG Chairs' Meeting), and working with other SSC Specialist Groups on conservation action.

A full list of action items has been captured in the main Meeting Report, and full database containing the data in the delegates' Feedback Forms has been created. To ensure that the meeting remains part of a much bigger process and that the outputs of the meeting are followed-through, various measures will be put in place. The most important of these will be investigating the creation of an electronic collaboration portal and various other online communications tools to ensure that the constructive networking and interaction will continue.

Meeting Report

Various techniques were used during the meeting to capture the essence of the meeting. These included the filming by an official film-crew, the recording of questions on cards, rapporteurs collating meeting highlights and any action items that must be followed up after the meeting, and the taking of numerous photographs.

The [SSC SG Chairs' Meeting Webpage](#) has been created and contains the presentations from the meeting, various background reading documents, as well as a link to a discussion forum and photograph-sharing website.

A full Meeting Report detailing each session's highlights and a complete list of the action items from the meeting is available on the [SSC SG Chairs' Meeting Webpage](#). The Meeting Report also suggests a list of the "top ten lessons and future challenges from the meeting".