New software assists wetland conservation

To coincide with World Wetlands Day on 2 February 2011, the Royal Zoological Society of Scotland (RZSS) has announced the breakthrough development and launch of a special piece of software that now contributes to the vital conservation of the Pantanal freshwater wetlands in Brazil. The project is the culmination of six years' research.

The RZSS regional conservation and research team has worked with local organisations to develop this special project. The programme, called the Delta Diet, is crucial to help conserve and protect the Brazilian Pantanal, which has become increasingly threatened by large development programmes and changes in land management practices. This tool, developed by the RZSS team and Embrapa Pantanal (a Brazilian Government research institute), allows the rapid analysis of faecal samples from plant-eating animals, which in turn helps scientists understand the nutritional needs and foraging strategies of animals in the wetlands – all crucial information that will contribute to the conservation and sustainable use of the Pantanal ecosystem.

Dr Arnaud Desbiez, the RZSS regional conservation and research coordinator for Latin America, comments: 'This is an immensely positive long-term legacy left by RZSS. To date over 250 plants have been characterised, leading to detailed manuals for plant families being published, and we have been able to examine the diet of several species through the different seasons of the year. This is particularly urgent since cattle ranching activities are intensifying and destroying important wildlife habitat. The DeltaDiet tool is ultimately key to developing a strategy to conserve the Pantanal – the largest freshwater wetland in the world.'

The database will now be widely and freely available for use by other researchers and will constantly be updated with new data. Other conservation and research projects continue to be developed by RZSS in the region.

Abridged from a Royal Zoological Society of Scotland press release, 1 February 2011

Salisbury Plain Great Bustard Project

A project to reintroduce the great bustard (*Otis tarda*) to the U.K. has been given a €1.8-million boost from the European Union.

The world's heaviest flying bird was hunted to extinction in the U.K. in 1832. It was reintroduced to Salisbury Plain in Wiltshire in 2004. A population of around 18 has been established from chicks brought from Russia. The new cash will cover 75% of the scheme's costs, including monitoring the birds with GPS satellite transmitters.

The Great Bustard Consortium was founded in 2004 to reintroduce the birds. It is made up of the Great Bustard Group, the University of Bath, the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds and Natural England. The group is embarking on a five-year project, funded by an EU Life+ grant.

In 2009, the first great bustard chicks in 177 years hatched in the wild in the U.K. Last year, at least four chicks hatched and two native chicks were successfully reared to fledging. Male great bustards can reach more than one metre tall with a wingspan of up to 2.4 m.

A University of Bath spokesman said 16 bustards had been fitted with satellite transmitters to track where they feed and roost. The areas will be monitored for the availability of food, and for predators. Feeding patches with the right plants and seeds to provide food and attract the type of insects the birds eat will also be cultivated.

David Waters, founder and director of the Great Bustard Group, said: 'Despite our successes over the last six years, we would sometimes struggle to find £10 or £20 to put diesel in the Land Rover; now we have a chance to give this project real wings. The funding will provide a properly resourced project, with four new posts, new monitoring equipment and even the possibility of a second release site.' The project's partners will still have to find 25% of the costs.

'We're particularly interested in how the birds will behave in their new habitat, said Bath Ph.D. student John Burnside. 'Great bustards learn a lot of their behaviour from each other and so the newly introduced chicks have to learn quickly how to feed, survive and avoid predators without the help of their mother. As the population becomes established, their survival chances should hopefully get better – this project will be looking into ways of improving release methods and the survival of the birds in the long term.'

BBC News Wiltshire

A new idea to stop rhino poaching

Well-equipped, sophisticated organized crime syndicates have killed more than 800 African rhinos in the past three years – just for their horns. With the most serious poaching upsurge in South Africa, Zimbabwe and Kenya, Africa's top rhino experts recently met in South Africa to assess the status of rhinos across the continent and to identify strategies to combat the poaching crisis. South Africa alone lost 333 rhinos last year and so far this year has lost more than 70. Most rhino horns leaving Africa are destined for South-East Asian medicinal markets that are believed to be driving the poaching epidemic.

A recent attack on a black rhino which was shot several times and dehorned in the Save Conservancy in Zimbabwe has prompted outrage. The most horrifying aspect of this atrocity was that the mutilated rhino did not die in the attack and was left wandering around in agony. Coincidentally, a very similar incident happened in South Africa recently.

Various methods are employed to try and prevent rhinos from falling prey to poachers, but the slaughter and maiming continues unabated. Dehorning is quite a popular method, but this doesn't seem to deter the poachers. The rhinos endure a certain amount of stress in the dehorning exercise, and once their horns have been removed they no longer have that defence mechanism. In the case of females, when they give birth to a calf they need the horn to help the newborn rhino to its feet. Another disadvantage of dehorning is that the horn grows back and the process has to be repeated regularly throughout the animal's lifetime.

Instead of spending money on dehorning, it has been suggested that the best and most cost-effective way to minimize poaching and try to prevent the extinction of the species is to administer poison to the horns. This was done by a farmer in South Africa, and he says the poison, whilst deadly to humans, has no effect whatsoever on the rhino. This may seem like a drastic measure, but the only way to prevent rhino poaching is to discourage people from buying horn, and it would only need to be done once to each rhino. Signs could be erected where rhinos are kept warning poachers that the horns are poisoned. Warnings could also be issued through media campaigns worldwide, and the word would soon get around that consumption of rhino horn could prove fatal.

Wildlife Extra News (**www.wildlifeextra.com**), 20 April 2011