



Hippo Specialist Group Priorities and Proposed Conservation Activities

The Hippo Specialist Group focuses its attention on two extant hippo species, common hippos (*Hippopotamus amphibius*) whose remaining range covers 38 sub-Saharan countries and pygmy hippos (*Choeropsis liberiensis*) which is found in just four countries in West Africa.

Both hippo species face significant threats to their population viability and future. We are committed to working with the global conservation network, governmental and other entities to ensure the long-term survival of these species and to support sustainable conservation and management of hippos across their range. This document was developed during the first Hippo Specialist Group (HSG) meeting which took place in February 2017 in Prague.

The HSG has identified three key priorities for the current (2017-2020) quadrennial

- 1) **Communication and outreach** to strengthen and improve awareness of hippo conservation within the general public and conservation community. This priority action would improve communication and outreach within the HSG through quarterly conference calls, increased email communication, information sharing via Google Drive, and a new website. A new website is a critical need as it serves as the face of the HSG, the means by which we can reach, educate and communicate with a global audience. In addition to publishing scientific articles, we will also share our research and other activities in a quarterly newsletter *Suiform Soundings*. We are working to re-form our membership to ensure that members are committed to communicate their activities and progress and participate as part of an active and engaged membership. We plan to have our website in place in 2018, but have already started working on our stronger communication and outreach plan.
- 2) **Partnerships** between the HSG and conservation or ex-situ facilities. It is clear to catalyze conservation and research action the HSG needs partners. We are looking for partner

institutions willing to host the HSG website, help in funding management, and work collaboratively with the HSG to support shared vision and activities.

- 3) **Conservation projects** that catalyze research and conservation action. We have identified several conservation and research projects that directly address the threats and challenges to hippo populations and their habitat. We plan to work with our partners to secure resources that can support these projects. Other conservation and research projects will be developed in consultation with our membership and the conservation community. We are looking for funding to support these projects and will initiate projects as soon as funding becomes available.

Here, we describe proposed hippo conservation projects that the HSG recognizes as critical contributions to support the conservation of common and pygmy hippo (projects are not presented in a particular order)

1) Common hippo monitoring and regional coordination

For common hippos, action plans that capitalize on existing information and translate information into action are desperately needed. To date, no regional or national action plans have been developed for common hippos. While the need for such plans is clear, the HSG is keen to engage with partners and other interested organizations to identify the most appropriate scale for these plans— regional, national, border region clusters. Currently we are working to support two projects that we believe are important to support action plan development. We expect to develop other projects to meet these goals during the quadrennial. The regions where the coordination is mostly needed are West, Central and East Africa.

1a) Burkino Faso common hippo monitoring and West African conservation coordination

West Africa is the region where common hippos are at greatest risk as common hippo populations are small and fragmented. There is also a need for more coordination within Burkina to also develop better practices on dealing with human-wildlife conflict and land-use issues, a critical issue for common hippo populations in this region. Ollo Dibloni, an active and committed HSG member, has proposed a project to monitor common hippos in Burkino Faso, and work to consolidate information and conservation action from other colleagues and organizations within Burkina Faso and neighboring West African countries – Mali, Togo, Ivory Coast, Niger, Benin, Ghana. The goal of this effort would be to develop a common hippo regional network in which people could share conservation information and best practices

1b) Common hippo monitoring in Democratic Republic of Congo and the Central African region

DRC was a former stronghold for common hippo populations across the continent but those populations were decimated in the 1990's as a result of civil unrest and instability in DRC. Slowly, the hippo populations in Virunga National Park and Lake Edward and other locations are slowly starting to recover. In collaboration with HSG members who have worked in DRC for nearly 10 years and are well-connected within the region, the HSG is keen to support monitoring and coordination in this region. Beyond providing important *in situ* population information, the documentation of the

population recovery has important implications for common hippo conservation across the continent. These efforts would also serve to establish a common hippo monitoring and conservation network in neighboring countries - Rwanda and Burundi.

2) Pygmy hippo regional conservation network

In 2011 and 2012, members of the HSG with IUCN colleagues (D. Mallon) and NGO partners worked to develop a National Action Plan for Liberia and a comprehensive conservation strategy for pygmy hippos across their range. These documents were essential steps in both national and regional pygmy hippo conservation by identifying the priorities for the species. With these documents as a blueprint and guide, what is needed now is a conservation network that has the ability to support key initiatives and actions to follow through on the recommendations made within the plans.

3) Pygmy hippo genetics

Pygmy hippo population monitoring has been hampered by the cryptic nature of the species. Pygmy hippos are rarely seen, even on remote cameras. This project builds on ongoing work by Dr. Helen Senn from the Royal Zoological Society of Scotland (RZSS) to develop genetic markers and genetic analysis that can support pygmy hippo population monitoring. RZSS has complete initial feasibility analyses and is currently waiting to receive samples collected via an established protocol from Annika Hillers, an active and committed HSG member, to make sure that RZSS lab researchers are able to extract genetic information from properly stored dung samples. In the future, RZSS and HSG will work to shift the genetic research to local capacity and organizations.