

Conservation news

IUCN Red List Training and Assessment Workshop for Africa's bats, Namibia


In September 2023, an IUCN Red List Training and Assessment Workshop for Africa's bats was held in Swakopmund, Namibia. Bats without Borders, Bat Conservation Africa, the IUCN Red List Authority, IUCN Species Survival Commission Bat Specialist Group, Global Union of Bat Diversity Networks, Lube Bat Conservancy and University of Namibia brought together 28 participants and trainers, of whom 20 were from nine African countries; 15 were early-career or in a graduate programme. Funding was provided by The Rufford Foundation, Woodtiger Fund, Greater Houston Community Foundation, Oppenheimer Generations-Research and Conservation, National Science Foundation and individually leveraged funds.

The workshop had four objectives: to establish an expanded network of trained experts to keep Red List assessments of Africa's bats up to date, for regional teams to work on assessments during the training and future additional assessments, to launch regional collaborations to draft bat conservation and research programmes, and to develop strategies for integration of bats into the Key Biodiversity Areas (KBA) initiative.

All participants were trained as Red List assessors and another 15 have subsequently been recruited. During the workshop, 26 Red List assessments were started, focusing on species that had not previously been assessed because they were new to science or their status had changed following taxonomic revisions.

Teams are being established to develop and advance regional bat conservation and research plans. As bats were not considered in the establishment of most KBAs, in 2022 the Global Union of Bat Diversity Networks established a group to ensure bats are considered as trigger species in existing KBAs and could be used help establish new KBAs (two or more range restricted species need to be present, with at least 1% of their range at a site to trigger KBA status). Following this workshop and KBA training at a Rufford Learning Event organized and led by Rachael Cooper-Bohannon in Otjiwarongo, Namibia in September 2023, a multifaceted approach will ensure bats are considered within the global KBA initiative. For example, in Kenya a national gap analysis should dramatically change how bats are represented in Kenya's KBAs. Initial analyses show that none of the current bat trigger species in existing KBAs will be recognized by the new global KBA standard established in 2016. There are several KBAs where bats will be recognized as a trigger and at least one new KBA will be proposed for the Vulnerable *Otomops harrisoni* at Mount Suswa.

Twenty-six participants presented work at the 14th African Small Mammal Symposium after the workshop. This workshop successfully engaged the next generation of bat conservationists and researchers and showed them that they do not work alone—people from across Africa and globally are there to support, encourage and mentor them.

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The Dam Removal Europe movement reaches Romania

Thanks to the partnership between Fauna & Flora and the World Fish Migration Foundation, the Dam Removal Europe movement has reached Romania. A major international conference—Our Waters—Restoring the Longitudinal Connectivity of Romanian Rivers—took place on 8 November 2023 in Bucharest. The conference brought together more than 80 specialists and representatives of relevant institutions and civil society from 11 countries and from a range of institutions in the host country (the National Administration of Romanian Waters, National Agency for Environmental Protection, National Agency for Protected Areas, National Environmental Guard, research institutes, universities and other institutions). Several environmental NGOs, such as the Alex Găvan Foundation, WWF and Aquacrisius, were also represented, as well as private engineering companies.

Speakers, both Romanian and international, made technical and biodiversity conservation arguments in favour of removing dams and obsolete weirs, which block the longitudinal connectivity of rivers, hindering sediment and nutrient movement and fish migration. Of note were presentations by engineers from Inter-Fluve demonstrating the benefits of the removal of barriers from rivers. On 9 November there was a field trip to the habitat of the Critically Endangered asprete or sculpin perch *Romanichthys valsanicola*, which is fragmented by several barriers.

One of the benefits of this event was the collaboration that has developed between Fauna & Flora and the National Administration of Romanian Waters, the main governmental water management body. The results of Fauna & Flora's awareness-raising were also evident in the large number of Romanian Waters employees attending the conference. After the conference the chief engineer who led the Romanian Waters delegation proposed the development of a strategy and work plan to facilitate the restoration of the longitudinal connectivity of the country's rivers.

This openness from state institutions, as well as the positive feedback received from the attendees, encourages us to hope that the Dam Removal Movement in Romania will not limit itself to the organization of this event, but will result in the removal of as many obsolete barriers as possible and thus the restoration of longitudinal river connectivity.

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All sawfish now Critically Endangered but sustained conservation efforts can lead to recovery

In November 2021, the IUCN Species Survival Commission Shark Specialist Group held a series of online workshops to reassess the Red List status of the five sawfish species (family Pristidae). This process concluded in December 2023 with the publication of the final assessment, for the narrow sawfish *Anoxypristis cuspidata*.








Since the previous assessments, conducted in 2012, sawfish have continued to face severe, ongoing threats from fishing and habitat loss, and collectively their status has worsened. Previously, three species were categorized as Critically Endangered and two as Endangered. With the reassessment of the narrow sawfish and dwarf sawfish *Pristis clavata*, all five species are now categorized as Critically Endangered. Based on the available evidence, population size reduction $\geq 80\%$ was inferred or suspected over the last three generations as a result of a decline in their extent of occurrence and habitat quality, and potential levels of exploitation, and the causes of this reduction have not ceased. The latest assessments are disheartening and a reminder that continued actions to reduce mortality and protect critical habitats are urgently needed to prevent the extinction of sawfishes.

Nevertheless, some hope can be drawn from new information gathered during the reassessments. Several regions continue to support viable populations of some sawfish

species, including parts of northern Australia and Papua New Guinea. Additionally, there is strong evidence that the smalltooth sawfish *Pristis pectinata* is beginning to recover in Florida waters after 2 decades of sustained conservation efforts.

The past decade has also seen a shift in sawfish conservation, a sign that the 2014 Shark Specialist Group's Global Sawfish Conservation Strategy may be working (Yan et al., 2021, *Science Advances*, 7, 7). From relative obscurity, sawfish have moved into the conservation spotlight, with the emergence of several dedicated conservation initiatives, NGOs, directed funding and research programmes. This was reflected in the size and geographical diversity of the Red List reassessment team, which comprised 61 people from 25 nations.

Work over the last decade has provided a clearer picture of the global distribution of sawfishes, including in many poorly surveyed areas. This has led to the identification of sites where sawfishes continue to persist, amid intense pressure, such as in Bangladesh, Sudan and parts of Central America. Grassroots education and outreach programmes in these areas are leading to increased reports of sawfish being released alive. These initiatives are highlighting the potential to change attitudes toward these species and the urgent need for additional, similar approaches at the local level where sawfish are persisting.

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Important Marine Mammal Areas celebrated—yet some are now in danger

2023 marked the 10-year anniversary of the IUCN Marine Mammal Protected Areas Task Force. In 2013, the Task Force began to develop a conservation tool—Important Marine Mammal Areas (IMMAs)—that marine spatial planners, protected area practitioners, governments, industry stakeholders and scientists could use to protect whales, dolphins and other marine mammals and their habitats. As of March 2024 the Task Force has worked with more than 300 scientists to examine 74.3% of the global ocean, identifying 280 IMMAs.

Important Marine Mammal Areas are defined as discrete portions of habitat, important to marine mammals, that have the potential to be delineated and managed for conservation. They are not legal designations but independent, peer-reviewed assessments based on criteria supported by data. Important Marine Mammal Areas are now being