

# Small grants, big impact

How targeted conservation funding in Abu Dhabi is helping to save the world's most threatened species

WORDS: DEREK A. ISSACS

NICOLAS HEARD, ACTING DIRECTOR GENERAL OF THE MOHAMED BIN ZAYED SPECIES CONSERVATION FUND (MBZF)

Nicolas Heard, the charismatic Acting Director General of the Mohamed bin Zayed Species Conservation Fund (MBZF), recounts the Fund's remarkable journey. As we sit down to chat, he starts with a vivid anecdote from January 2008. "It's quite a story," he begins. "In 2008, Abu Dhabi, through the Environment Agency, hosted an event that brought together the senior leadership of the Species Survival Commission. This was a landmark meeting because it was the first time all these leaders had gathered in one place."

The Species Survival Commission, part of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature, has been a global network for conservation since 1948. Nicolas explains that during this meeting, a crucial message was delivered to the then Crown Prince Sheikh Mohammed: species conservation was being overlooked in favour of large-scale climate and ecosystem projects. "While climate and ecosystems are undeniably important," Nicolas notes, "there was a glaring gap for targeted species conservation initiatives."

In response, the Crown Prince endowed the Fund with 25 million euros, marking the inception of the Mohamed bin Zayed Species Conservation Fund. The Fund's mission? To provide small-scale grants, capped at USD25,000, with an average of USD9,000, to grassroots conservation projects worldwide. "From the very beginning, we aimed to operate with a philosophy of philanthropy, taking calculated risks and providing support without making people jump through too many hoops," Nicolas says. "We wanted to support those on the ground doing the real conservation work."

As Nicolas delves deeper into the Fund's impact, his passion is palpable. "We've awarded over USD26 million to about 2800 projects in 15 years," he shares proudly. "These grants are intentionally small but mighty, enabling local organisations, individuals, and NGOs, particularly in developing countries, to make a significant difference." His eyes light up as he talks about the practical and flexible approach of the Fund. "In many places, USD10,000 can achieve a lot. It's about being pragmatic and ensuring conservation efforts can

flourish where they're most needed."

Nicolas's dedication to making the grant process as accessible and efficient as possible is clear. "We want to help people connect with nature and do the work, not get bogged down with paperwork," he emphasises. This ethos of trust and empowerment underpins the Fund's continued success in supporting the preservation of some of the world's most threatened species.

## Rediscovering the Cave Squeaker

During our conversation, Nicolas goes on to share some of the Fund's most remarkable success stories. One such story takes us to Zimbabwe, where the elusive Cave Squeaker, a species of frog hadn't been seen since the 1960s. "A passionate conservationist approached us for a small grant, around USD3,000 to USD4,000, to search for this frog," Nicolas recalls. "The conservationist was getting on in years but took some Zimbabwean students with him on the expedition."

Despite their efforts, the initial search proved fruitless. Undeterred, the team returned with

IMAGE CREDIT: PROAVES



STARRY NIGHT TOAD IN COLOMBIA

IMAGE CREDIT: FUNDACIÓN ATELOPUS

another small grant, determined to explore a different area. This time, the students succeeded in rediscovering the Cave Squeaker, a species believed lost for nearly half a century. "This discovery was monumental," Nicolas says. "Not only did they find the frog, but they also initiated a breeding programme back in Harare, effectively pulling the species back from the brink of extinction."

## Practical solutions for protecting wildcats

Another compelling case study involves small wildcats in the Americas, where these predators often fall victim to human retaliation after preying on chickens. Nicolas explains, "In South and Central America, small wildcats stealing chickens is a significant issue. Communities retaliate by killing the cats, even if they're only suspected of being the culprits." To combat this, the Fund has provided several grants aimed at protecting both chickens and wildcats.

"For around USD500, we can build secure chicken coops that keep wildcats out," Nicolas notes. "This

simple solution not only protects the chickens but also prevents wildcats from being unfairly targeted and killed." This practical intervention has shown promising results, with communities gradually adopting more sustainable and humane practices. "Changing local mindsets takes time, but we're seeing a better acceptance and understanding of wildcats' ecological importance," he adds.

## Fighting frog disease with amphibian arks

Globally, frog populations have been devastated by a disease that originated in Costa Rica, spreading primarily through the Americas. "One of the major threats to frogs is this disease, which has necessitated drastic conservation measures," Nicolas explains. "We've supported projects whereby the last individuals of some species are extracted and placed in amphibian arks - repurposed shipping containers designed to keep them safe and breeding."

This last-ditch effort aims to protect these species until it's safe to reintroduce them to their natural habitats. However, the Fund's

primary focus remains on in-situ conservation. "The real goal is to reduce threats in their natural environments, whether it's disease, habitat destruction, or invasive species," Nicolas emphasises. Small grants, often just a few thousand dollars, can make a significant difference in these efforts.

## Restoring freshwater habitats

The introduction of non-native species poses another challenge to biodiversity, particularly in freshwater ecosystems. "In the Americas and Southern Africa, introduced trout have wreaked havoc on native fish, frogs, and even birds," Nicolas points out. "We've funded projects aimed at removing these invasive species from stretches of water and restoring the habitat."

These targeted interventions help create safe havens for native species, ensuring their survival. "It's all about removing threats and restoring habitats," Nicolas concludes. "Even small grants can have a big impact when they're given to the right people with the right projects."

### A streamlined application process

To support such impactful projects, the MBZF has developed a straightforward and inclusive approach to grant applications. Nicolas explains, “We have an online system that anyone can apply to at any time. There are no geographical restrictions, and applicants can be from NGOs, academic institutions, individuals, or government agencies. We support any threatened species, whether animal, plant, or fungus, anywhere in the world.” This open-door policy ensures that diverse conservation projects can seek funding.

The Fund’s application process is rigorous yet fair. “Three times a year, we gather all applications submitted up to that point for review,” Nicolas continues. “An independent advisory board of taxonomic experts evaluates the applications, making decisions based on a USD1.5 million annual budget, divided into USD500,000 per review cycle.” Despite the high failure rate - only 10 to 12 per cent of applications receive funding - the process aims to ensure that the most impactful and well-conceived projects are supported.

### Prioritising underrepresented species

One of the unique aspects of the MBZF is its focus on lesser-known and often overlooked species. “We feel a responsibility to support species that might not otherwise receive conservation funding,” Nicolas emphasises. “While many donors focus on iconic species like elephants, tigers and whales, we deliberately support less-loved invertebrates, freshwater fish, and reptiles that are equally crucial to their ecosystems.”

Nicolas highlights recent examples to illustrate this point. “In our last round of grants, we supported projects for cave invertebrates, a fish in Hungary, a fish in Sulawesi, bats, and rats. These species are not typically on the radar of the general public or most donors, yet they play vital roles in their ecosystems.” This strategic focus ensures that conservation efforts are distributed more equitably, addressing the needs of species that might otherwise be neglected.

### Making every dollar count

The Fund’s philosophy revolves around making a tangible impact with limited resources. “Given our limited budget, we aim to ensure that our grants are as impactful as possible for both the species and the individuals leading the projects,” Nicolas explains. “For instance, while USD10,000 might not make a significant difference for tiger



A FATU HIVA MONARCH

conservation, it can be crucial for a frog species found only on a mountaintop in the Andes.”

Nicolas concludes with a powerful thought: “These lesser-known species are often just as important ecologically as the more famous ones. By supporting them, we help maintain the balance of their ecosystems. Our small grants model, coupled with a philanthropic ethos, allows us to make a real difference, even if we don’t always get much back in terms of recognition. It’s about ensuring that these under loved species have a fighting chance.”

### A collaborative effort with Mubadala

Nicolas details the expansion of their impact through a partnership with Mubadala, a state-owned global investment management holding company. “In late 2020, we signed an agreement with Mubadala for a three-year partnership, whereby they committed to doubling our annual grant giving for those three years,” Nicolas explains. “These weren’t for the small grants we typically award but were larger grants, between

USD100,000 to USD200,000 per year, aimed at specific projects in countries where Mubadala has commercial interests.” This collaboration focused on developing substantial conservation projects with local partners in four to five different countries.

### Manatee conservation in Guinea

One of the notable projects from this partnership centres on African manatees in Guinea. “Mubadala wanted a project with African manatees in Guinea, so we teamed up with a local NGO in Senegal led by a specialist named Lucy Keith-Diagne, the Executive Director of the African Aquatic Conservation Fund.” Nicolas says. Lucy’s expertise in African manatees made her the perfect leader for this project. She visited Abu Dhabi for the World Environmental Education Congress in January 2024, coinciding with The National Aquarium Abu Dhabi’s decision to bring manatees from Seoul, South Korea.

This serendipitous timing led to a collaboration



SUNDA CLOUDED LEOPARD IN MALAYSIA

between Lucy and The National Aquarium Abu Dhabi. “We act as the intermediary between The National Aquarium and Lucy’s efforts,” Nicolas says. “Her work spans across West Africa, where she aims to train local conservationists and build their skills in manatee conservation.” The proceeds from The National Aquarium’s manatee store support Lucy’s fieldwork and the training of local researchers.

### Supporting local conservationists

The project involves extensive research, including surveys to locate and assess the manatee populations and their threats. “Part of Lucy’s work, funded by Mubadala, is to develop a fellowship programme in Guinea,” Nicolas says. This programme aims to empower local people, providing them with the skills needed to become effective conservationists. Additionally, the project envisions local researchers coming to Abu Dhabi to observe and study the manatees in the aquarium. “In the wild, manatees live in murky waters where

they’re hard to see,” Nicolas explains. “But in the aquarium, young researchers can observe their behaviour, diet, and health, gaining valuable insights that they can apply to wild manatee conservation back home.”

### A holistic approach

This project exemplifies the MBZF’s holistic approach to conservation, combining fieldwork, research, and capacity building. “Our role is to support and facilitate these efforts, ensuring that the funding is used effectively,” Nicolas concludes. This multifaceted strategy not only addresses immediate conservation needs but also invests in the long-term sustainability of local conservation efforts, ensuring that species like the African manatee have a brighter future.

As our conversation winds down, it’s clear that MBZF is not just saving species but also transforming communities and ecosystems, one small grant at a time.

You can follow MBZF on Instagram @speciesconservationfund



# The gentle giants of Africa



Discover how a chance meeting some months ago ago led to the mysteries of the endangered African manatee being uncovered in Abu Dhabi

WORDS: SHANE REYNOLDS

In a city where the seemingly impossible becomes sometimes plausible, Abu Dhabi continues to surprise with its groundbreaking initiatives and captivating attractions.

Recently, The National Aquarium Abu Dhabi has added a touch of marine majesty to its vast collection, marking a historic milestone in marine conservation.

The story began with a serendipitous meeting that turned into a collaborative effort to protect one of the world's most endangered species. Today, The National Aquarium Abu Dhabi proudly hosts two magnificent male African manatees from Senegal, an achievement that underscores its commitment to conservation and education.

## A fortuitous encounter

Some months ago, the paths of three dedicated conservationists crossed in the most fortuitous way. Paul Hamilton, the visionary General

Manager of The National Aquarium Abu Dhabi; Lucy Keith-Diagne, a renowned manatee expert; and Nicolas Heard, Acting Director General of the Mohamed bin Zayed Species Conservation Fund (MBZF), met unexpectedly. This chance encounter ignited a collaboration that would change the future for these incredible mammals.

Reflecting on that moment, Paul shares, "It was pure luck meeting Nicolas and Lucy at the aquarium. Our shared passion for marine conservation and their expertise made it clear that working together was the only way forward."

## A visionary project

Paul, a New Zealand native with an impressive portfolio that includes the design of the Dubai Mall Aquarium, spearheaded the meticulous planning for the manatees' new habitat. With invaluable support from Nicolas and Lucy, among others, the project took shape seamlessly.

Support from MBZF has proven invaluable for the project to come to fruition. The Fund is an innovative philanthropic organisation providing small grants to boots-on-the-ground, get-your-hands-dirty, in-the-field species conservation projects for the world's most threatened species.

"We are proud to collaborate with the MBZF and the African Aquatic Conservation Fund (AACF)

on this vital project. By combining our resources and expertise, we are making significant strides in protecting the African manatee and preserving the biodiversity of West Africa," says Paul.

## Commitment to conservation

The National Aquarium Abu Dhabi has pledged an annual contribution of USD25,000 to support this project. Further funds are sourced from proceeds of its African themed retail shop, with all funds making its way across 19 West African countries and being invested in resources, research, conservation, and educational outreach aimed at protecting African manatee populations in Senegal and Guinea.

Key areas of focus for the African Manatee Conservation Project include studies on manatee population genetics, acoustics, feeding ecology, and physiology. This research is vital for understanding the threats these manatees face and developing strategies to mitigate them. The project will support at least ten researchers and African graduate students, covering expenses such as fieldwork, laboratory analyses, and travel for presenting findings at international conferences.

Lucy Keith-Diagne, Co-Founder and Executive Director of the African Aquatic Conservation Fund, has dedicated 37 years to marine biology, with



*"By combining our resources and expertise, we can make significant strides in protecting the African manatee and preserving the biodiversity of West Africa."*

27 of those focused on manatees. Her expertise and unwavering commitment have been vital in ensuring the survival of these enigmatic creatures.

"We were very fortunate to run into Lucy and Nicolas when we did. I was looking at other organisations to run our projects in Africa, so when I met them, it was like everything fell into place. We have a foundation that is onshore, locally based, and an organisation in Africa with global experts on African manatees," Paul explains.

"Lucy's number one creature is the manatee. This is the thing she has spent her whole life on. So, between Lucy and Nicolas, I have a dream team. It feels like it's meant to be. We immediately got to work on how to structure this. MBZF speciality is organising and monitoring projects, so they guided us through the entire process."

PAUL HAMILTON, GENERAL MANAGER OF THE NATIONAL AQUARIUM ABU DHABI



IMAGE CREDIT: THE NATIONAL AQUARIUM ABU DHABI

Meet Lucy Keith-Diagne, Co-Founder and Executive Director of the African Aquatic Conservation Fund

## What are the main threats facing African manatees?

**Lucy:** The primary threats to African manatees, in order of severity, are illegal hunting, capture in fisheries (bycatch), entrapment within and behind dam structures, habitat loss, and watercraft mortality from boat collisions.

## What conservation efforts are being undertaken to combat these threats?

**Lucy:** In Senegal, we work with six marine protected areas, two coastal national parks, one freshwater protected area, and two dam management authorities. Our initiatives include monitoring and reducing threats, raising awareness in schools and among government wildlife and fisheries agencies, and removing gates in dams that trapped manatees. We're also working on retrofitting a second dam to prevent further manatee deaths.

How important is the support from the Mohamed bin Zayed Conservation Species Fund?

**Lucy:** The MBZF has been critically important for our work in Guinea. The Funding has allowed us to increase the number of researchers to 13, the highest in any African country. These researchers are raising awareness about manatee protection and leading research efforts throughout Guinea. We've discovered five new rivers where manatees were previously undocumented and are conducting the first environmental DNA (eDNA) study of manatees in West Africa.

## What impact has the partnership with MBZF, and the National Aquarium had?

**Lucy:** The introduction by MBZF to the National Aquarium has been transformative. Our partnership is expanding the impact of MBZF's support to researchers in additional African countries, significantly enhancing our conservation efforts across the region

## A testament to global conservation efforts

The presence of these African manatees at the The National Aquarium Abu Dhabi is more than just a spectacle; it is a testament to global conservation efforts. With only 10 to 15 manatees in captivity worldwide, their addition to the aquarium is a monumental achievement. Moreover, the efforts extend beyond manatees. Just last month, over 200 rehabilitated turtles were released into the waters off Saadiyat Beach, showcasing the aquarium's dedication to marine life.

Indeed, it is the ongoing conservation efforts of the staff at The National Aquarium Abu Dhabi which Paul is most proud of and passionate about, illustrated best by the many ongoing initiatives being rolled out by him and his hard-working colleagues. "Our mission goes beyond entertainment. Revenue from ticket sales is reinvested into marine conservation projects. Our response unit is on call weekly to aid stranded or distressed animals. We're dedicated to making a difference."

As The National Aquarium Abu Dhabi continues to captivate visitors with its vibrant marine life, the story of these African manatees serves as a powerful reminder of what can be achieved when passion, timing, and a bit of luck come together. The legacy of this encounter will undoubtedly inspire future generations to cherish and protect our oceans' treasures.