

Summary Report: Conservation and welfare of animals in Uganda, with especial reference to owls

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I spent April 2003 amongst wildlife, conservationists, vets and other animal welfare workers in Uganda, East Africa.

I had travelled there principally to assist with Makerere University's owl conservation project, based at the department of Wildlife and Animal Resources Management (WARM). This was initiated in 2001 by Professor and Mrs J Cooper (UK) and Dr Christine Dranzoa, head of WARM. In particular I had helped to organise, and participated in, a workshop held at WARM, entitled "Owls: their Health, Welfare and Conservation", which was sponsored by The International Owl Society and Screech Owl Sanctuary, two UK-based organisations.

Being largely nocturnal or crepuscular, owls are not an easy group to study. In addition, in Uganda, they are viewed as birds of ill omen. Human society is characterised by poverty, and is in the grip of an AIDS epidemic: the context in which owl conservation exists in Uganda is far shifted from that which exists at home.

Avitourism gives one reason why owls should be protected in a country that has many human problems, and a society that spurns their existence. Uganda is recognised as one of the most significant locations in the world for birds, and this generates income when promoted to an international birdwatching community by the Tourist Board. Owls, like other raptors, are high profile species that visiting birdwatchers wish to see.

The owl workshop aimed to sensitise people to the idea of conserving and caring for owls. Delegates included staff from NatureUganda, private veterinary practice, commercial bird guides, and Uganda Wildlife Education Centre (UWEC), who provided an African wood owl for demonstration. Professor and Mrs Cooper, and Dr Dranzoa, gave lectures, and Makerere students spoke about work to date. I gave a short talk on "The study of owls in the wild". A book on owls, donated by Mr Peter Stocks, UK, was presented and gratefully received (Fig 1).



Fig 1. Sean Wensley presenting Dr Christine Dranzoa, head of WARM, with König's "Owls: A Guide To The Owls of The World"



Fig 2. Local children seeing an owl for the first time - in this case, an injured barn owl (*Tyto alba affinis*)



Fig 4. Sean Wensley with Senhte Celsus, another student on the Wildlife Health and Management MSc course, performing a post-mortem examination of a barn owl

Education must play a key role if owls are to be better tolerated by Ugandan society. I spoke to students at a local school about owls, and demonstrated a casualty barn owl to a local community (Fig 2). At later post-mortem examination, nematodes isolated from it were identified and recorded (Fig 3, 4). Evening searches for owls were made of Makerere University campus, and species logged.

In addition to conservation work, I was able to participate in animal welfare projects with students from WARM. Pre-slaughter stunning was demonstrated for the first time at a Kampala abattoir, following a Humane Slaughter workshop, jointly organised by the USPCA and WSPA. Later I assisted with a welfare inspection of UWEC.

I learnt much about the veterinary profession in Uganda, through discussions at Makerere Vet School, and visits to local practitioners. Vets can play a central role in promoting welfare and conservation of animals. To have gained experience of this role overseas, in a country with such stimulating human and non-human elements, was a privilege indeed. My many thanks go to Professor and Mrs Cooper for giving me the opportunity to visit Uganda, and to the BVA for their invaluable financial support.

Sean Wensley
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Fig 3. Jesca Nakayima, a student on the WARM-based MSc in Wildlife Health and Management, demonstrating the barn owl prior to post-mortem examination