

## 2021 Report

# IUCN SSC Hippo Specialist Group



#### CO-CHAIR

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#### CO-CHAIR

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#### NUMBER OF MEMBERS

25

#### SOCIAL MEDIA AND WEBSITE

Website: <https://www.hipposg.org>

### Mission statement

We are committed to working with the global conservation network, governmental and other entities to ensure the long-term survival of the two hippo species (Common and Pygmy) and to support sustainable conservation and management of hippos across their range.

### Projected impact 2021–2025

The Hippo Specialist Group (HSG) conservation actions deal with two species that face different conservation challenges.

The Endangered Pygmy Hippo (*Choeropsis liberiensis*) has undergone and continues to experience declining populations due to habitat loss and human activity. The action of our group aims to stop and reverse this decline as well as to improve habitat protection. The second hippo species, Common Hippo (*Hippopotamus amphibius*), remains locally abundant in many parts of its former distribution. However, several populations, mostly in Central and West Africa, are declining and experience insufficient protection. Therefore, we aimed our conservation activities for these populations at all three aspects of the conservation cycle (assess, plan, act). We hope that our activities support the viability and survival of these populations with the potential of population recovery where needed. In

addition, we are committed to strengthening cooperation and collaboration with ex situ stakeholders to advance conservation of both hippo species. Lastly, via our new communication platform (web pages), we provide direct information on the biology of hippo species, describe the conservation projects endorsed by HSG, as well as general information to promote conservation action of hippos.

### Targets 2021–2025

#### ASSESS

**T-005** Conduct a research project on hippos as ecosystem engineers: Habitat use, ecology and behaviour of hippos in an important waterbody of Zululand.

**T-008** Reassess status and population trends of Common Hippopotamus (*Hippopotamus amphibius*) in eight West African countries.

**T-011** Use innovative technologies to assess the status of key hippopotamus populations in Nigeria.

#### PLAN

**T-010** Organise Common Hippo West African regional conservation strategy workshop.

#### ACT

**T-003** Implement the Côte d'Ivoire Pygmy Hippo project: research and actions for the conservation of Pygmy Hippopotamus (*Choeropsis liberiensis*) in Côte d'Ivoire.

**T-004** Support conservation mechanism of hippos in the Ruzizi River and Tanganyika lake in South Kivu Province, eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo.

**T-006** Protect Common Hippopotamus in Luama Landscape, Democratic Republic of the Congo.

**T-007** Implement the Pygmy Hippo community youth conservation volunteer programme of the Gola Rainforest National Park (GRNP), Sierra Leone.

**T-009** Conduct monitoring, restoration and long term conservation of the Common Hippopotamus population in the Mbari and Chinko drainage, eastern Central African Republic.

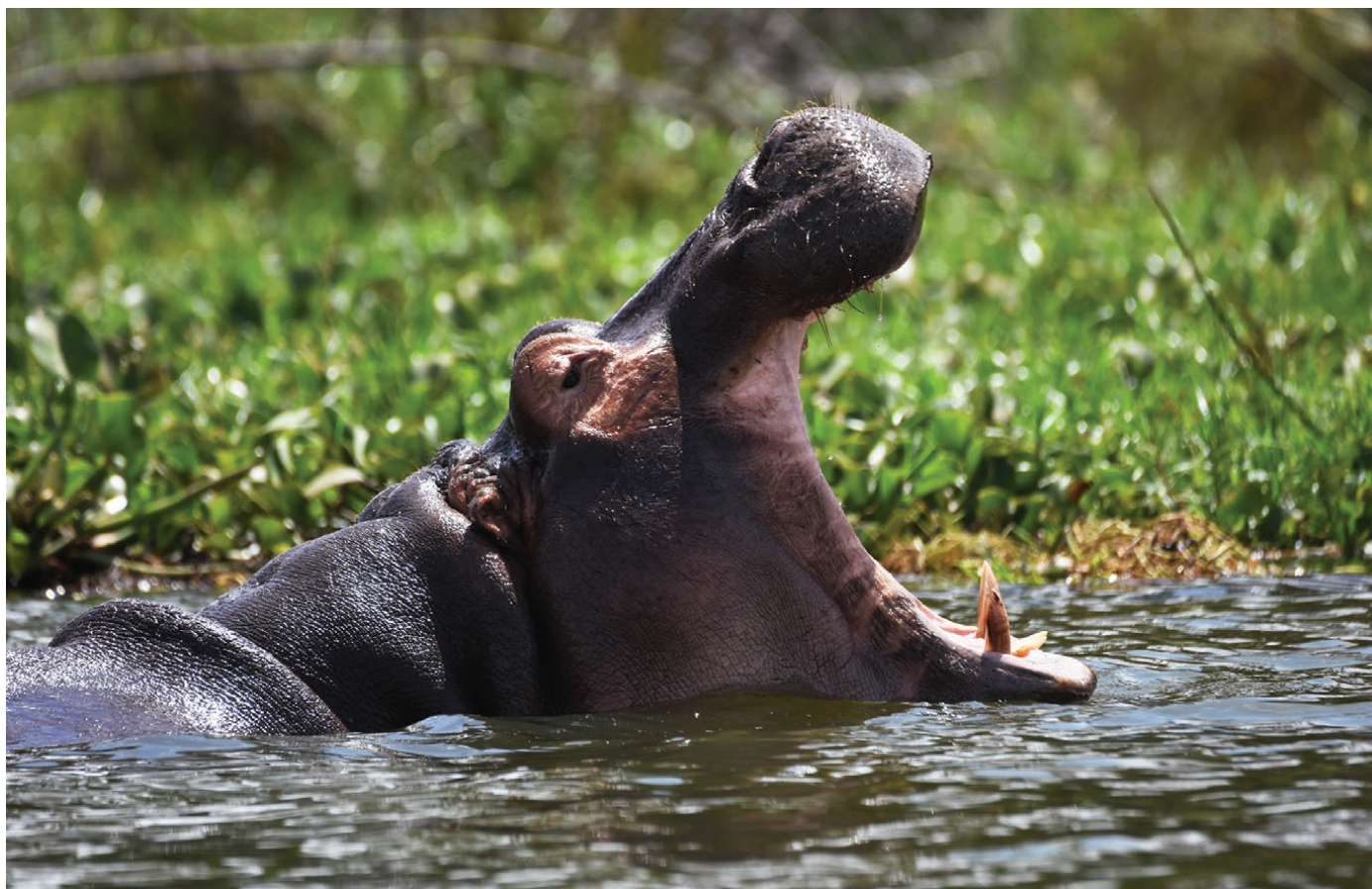
#### COMMUNICATE

**T-001** Establish and create new website in 2021.

**T-002** Launch Facebook account.

**T-012** Maintain and update the Hippo Specialist Group website.

**T-013** Provide statements of Hippo Specialist Group views on current problems associated with hippos.



Common Hippo in Naivasha Lake, the place of high level of human-hippo conflict  
Photo: Jan Pluháček

## Activities and results 2021

### ASSESS

#### Red List

T-011 (KSR 7)

Report: ongoing

**Result description:** The first part of this target was conducted from September to October 2021. At two key sites within the Benue River basin in north-eastern Nigeria (Kiri and Dadin Kowa Dam reservoirs), we conducted training programmes (capacity building); promoted education (awareness building); conducted surveys using drones to estimate hippo abundance, composition and distribution; and assessed threats to the species. We were forced to cancel survey work originally planned at one site (Kainji Dam reservoir in north-western Nigeria) due to increasing insecurity in that region. Although the research team has yet to analyse all data (which include thousands of drone images and videos), preliminary findings confirm what was suspected – that both reservoir sites are important for hippo populations in Nigeria. This is especially so for Kiri Dam reservoir, which has an estimated hippo population of about 70 individuals. This count reflects an increase over the most recent estimate of 56 individuals (Baker, L.R., et al. 2020. Common hippopotamus in Nigeria: New census data and literature review confirm the conservation importance of sites outside protected

areas. *Aquatic Conservation: Marine and Freshwater Ecosystems* 30:1996–2003. <https://doi.org/10.1002/aqc.3397>). The observed increase was likely the result of improved survey techniques (drones), ideal survey conditions (low water levels, as the dam floodgates were open), and successful reproduction at the site. At Dadin Kowa, we estimated 35–40 hippos in the reservoir. However, water levels were notably high at the time of our study there. Locating hippos across a vast body of water and extensive flooded farmlands proved challenging. We suspect that more hippos occur in, or use, this reservoir than observed; this assertion was also supported by local reports. Observations should improve at the end of the dry season when water levels are greatly reduced; thus, a dry-season survey at this site is planned for April–May 2022. Each of the studied hippo populations reacted differently to the drone. Our tests of disturbance showed that, in general, Kiri hippos were more accustomed to noise and had limited reactions to the drone, whereas Dadin Kowa hippos appeared to react to the drone at even relatively high altitudes. Consequently, researchers should not assume that drones will similarly affect hippo populations that occur in similar habitats and under similar conditions. We recommend conducting disturbance tests for each unique population before using drones to survey hippos. In both reservoir locations, hippos are threatened

by human-hippo conflict and a lack of natural grass forage, and at Kiri they are also threatened by siltation. Crop-foraging and crop destruction by hippos have led to extreme negative attitudes toward hippos, and at Kiri, hippo-caused human deaths have further exacerbated the precarious relationship between people and hippos. Land around both reservoirs (and on silted islands within the Kiri reservoir) is extensively farmed. Future conservation efforts at these sites must address crop-foraging and disruption of fishing activities by hippos and habitat degradation, as well as improve local livelihoods and promote conservation awareness. Collaboration among key stakeholders will be critical to success. Final results for this target are expected to be published in late 2022 or early 2023. These final population estimates will help the conservation community and other key stakeholders recognise the importance of these sites for hippopotamus conservation in Nigeria. It is notable that the most recent IUCN Red List assessment reported an estimated 100 hippos total across Nigeria (Lewison, R. and Pluháček, J. 2017. *Hippopotamus amphibius*. *The IUCN Red List of Threatened Species* 2017: e.T10103A18567364. <https://dx.doi.org/10.2305/IUCN.UK.2017-2.RLTS.T10103A18567364.en>. Accessed on 07 June 2022.), whereas these two reservoirs alone support at least that number.

A threat display from a male hippo at Kiri Dam reservoir.  
Photo: Lynne R. Baker/Nigeria Hippo Project



Director of the Adamawa State Wildlife Department identifies where hippos entered rice fields to forage at night at Kiri Dam reservoir  
Photo: Lynne R. Baker/Nigeria Hippo Project



At Dadin Kowa Dam reservoir, land around the reservoir is widely covered by guinea corn farms. There is very little natural forage for hippos  
Photo: Lynne R. Baker/Nigeria Hippo Project

Ideal conditions for both disturbance tests and drone surveys were hippo groups that were resting mostly or fully out of water, like this group at Kiri Dam reservoir  
 Photo: Sarah Farinelli/Nigeria Hippo Project



**Research activities**

T-005 (KSR 5)

**Number of scientific publications about species research that acknowledge SSC affiliation:** 0

**Result description:** We collected field data on hippo behavioural ecology and submitted three manuscripts (chapters from the thesis of Camille Fritsch, which was completed in 2021 and is available online) that detail aspects of hippo behavioural ecology and hippo population monitoring and management for review in international peer-reviewed scientific journals.

**PLAN**

**Policy**

T-010 (KSR 9)

**Number of Multilateral Environmental Agreement meetings attended by the SSC group:** 0

**Result description:** The planning of the meeting had to be postponed due to continuation of the COVID-19 pandemic.

**COMMUNICATE**

**Communication**

T-001 (KSR 12)

**New website established:** Achieved.

**Result description:** The new web pages of the IUCN SSC Hippo Specialist Group (HSG) were established and launched at <https://www.hipposg.org>. The pages are currently

kept in two language versions (English and Czech). Pages include the details of members, meetings, activities, projects endorsed by HSG, basic biological information for both species, the international studbooks, as well as the bibliography list for both species. The establishment of the pages was supported by our partner Ostrava Zoo and Botanical Park (Czech Republic).

T-012 (KSR 12)

**Number of web page updates per month on average:** 2

**Result description:** The new web pages of the IUCN SSC Hippo Specialist Group (HSG) were established and launched at <https://www.hipposg.org> in January 2021. The pages are regularly updated (at least two times per month), and are maintained in two languages (English and Czech). New sections (News, Studbooks) were established and updated in the regular way. Maintaining and updating of the pages is supported by our partner Ostrava Zoo and Botanical Park.

T-013 (KSR 12)

**Number of statements provided on problems related with hippos:** 1

**Result description:** We compiled and released a statement on free-ranging hippos in Colombia.

**Acknowledgements**

Leventis Foundation: Primary funder of this project. We appreciate the support of Ostrava Zoo and Botanical Park in creation and maintenance the new web pages of the Hippo Specialist Group. Our special thanks are due Markéta Gloneková for all the work associated with the new web pages.

**Summary of achievements**

**Total number of targets 2021–2025:** 13

**Geographic regions:** 9 Africa, 2 America, 3 Europe

**Actions during 2021:**

Assess: 2 (KSR 5, 7)

Plan: 1 (KSR 9)

Communicate: 3 (KSR 12)

**Overall achievement 2021–2025:**

