

Hippo Conservation and the World Conservation Union

Hippo Conservation is Important

To date, relatively little research is available on common hippos (*Hippopotamus amphibius*) yet what is known is that their presence is a critical element to the overall preservation of Africa's wetlands.

Their numbers and habitat have experienced rapid declines over the past several years as human encroachment on African waterways and nearby grasslands has dwindled their living space and food supply. Meanwhile, the ivory industry has utilized the massive canines of hippos as a legal substitute for the elephant ivory no longer available on the open market.

Less information is known about the pygmy hippo (*Hexaprotodon liberiensis*). In fact, the small population of pygmy hippos in western Africa was considered by some to be a myth until a little over a hundred years ago. In the mid-1970's pygmy hippos were discovered to be members of a genus previously thought to have gone extinct 2 million years ago. Today only no more than 3,000 pygmy hippos remain. Official protection for them is insufficient to ensure their survival in the wild.

Who We Are

The IUCN/SSC Hippo Group consists of a group of researchers dedicated to

promoting hippo conservation. Members promote scientifically based action for the conservation of common and pygmy hippos, and work to develop and execute programs that study, save, restore and manage hippo populations and their habitats. The Hippo Group is one of several Species Survival Commissions (SSC) developed by the IUCN to foster conservation, research and dissemination of information for species of conservation concern to the international conservation community.

Objectives of the Hippo Group

The objectives of the IUCN/SSC Hippo Group are to:

1. Monitor the conservation status of hippos and track threats to their persistence.
2. Identify conservation and research priorities for hippos and their habitat.
3. Generate recommendations, strategies, and policies that foster hippo conservation.
4. Enhance the efforts of individual researchers working on hippo biology, ecology, and conservation by offering support, and providing research access to an international forum.
5. Encourage understanding of the importance of hippo conservation to the international community, including government agencies, land managers, scientists, and the general public.



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A Few Facts About Hippos

Common Hippos

Common hippos are found in most African countries south of the Sahara. They spend most daylight hours in or very close to the water where they are often found sleeping or basking. At night they leave the water to feed in nearby grassy areas, often following well-established trails.

Common hippos live in herds of various sizes; herds ranging from one to more than 200 hippos have been observed. Typically, herds are comprised of one dominant male, who controls an area of water and shoreline, and females with their calves. Younger males are allowed to remain in the herd if they behave submissively. The dominant male chases and fights other males who attempt to breed with females in the herd. Occasionally, small groups of males may gather to form bachelor herds in less desirable territories.

Pygmy Hippos

Pygmy hippos are elusive animals living in the swamps of western Africa. They appear mainly in Liberia but are also found in small numbers in Guinea, Ivory Coast, and Sierra Leone.

Pygmy hippos rely on different vegetation for food than common hippos. They prefer to eat roots and shoots rather than grasses. As they move through the dense forest, they create maze-like tunnels through the underbrush. These tunnels are reused on a regular basis and are even shared with other pygmy hippos.

Little research is available on the pygmy hippo's daily habits in the wild, because at the first signs of danger, they will silently disappear into the water or forests. What is known is that they are more solitary than their larger cousins. Breeding pairs or females with a calf are occasionally seen. Otherwise, they tend to move independently through the forests more or less avoiding each other.

Common Name	Common Hippopotamus
Scientific Name	<i>Hippopotamus amphibius</i>
Remaining Population	125,000-148,000
Distribution	At least 29 countries in Sub-Saharan Africa*
Current Threats	Habitat loss, Poaching

Common Name	Pygmy Hippopotamus
Scientific Name	<i>Hexaprotodon liberiensis</i>
Remaining Population	No more than 3,000
Distribution	West Africa – primarily Liberia
Current Threats	Habitat loss, Civil unrest

Hippo Conservation

Current Status of the Common and Pygmy Hippo

Common hippos occur in large numbers in many parts of Africa. However, signs of a deteriorating population are increasingly apparent. Common hippos still appear in more than 29 countries across sub-Saharan Africa. Yet in almost half, populations are thought to be declining. Common hippos have now been recognized as a species Vulnerable to extinction by the IUCN.

Fewer than 3,000 pygmy hippos are believed to still remain in the wild. Because of civil unrest in the few countries in which pygmy hippos are found, there is no current information on their distribution or abundance. However, continuing habitat loss suggests their conservation status is poor. Pygmy hippos have now been identified as an Endangered Species.

Threats to Common Hippo Survival

Although common hippos are presently widespread throughout the African continent, their distribution is shrinking. The greatest threat to their survival is habitat loss though hunting for meat, trophies, and teeth also occurs.

Areas of slow-moving, fresh water with nearby grasslands are prime real estate for both hippos and humans. Unfortunately, this frequently leads to conflicts, and, as a result, hippos lose needed habitat.

Grasslands suitable for grazing are often replaced with crops to feed people. As hippos graze on land mostly at night, the true impact of the loss of grazing area may not be fully appreciated.

Threats to Pygmy Hippo Survival

Pygmy hippos are found almost exclusively in Liberia where ongoing deforestation and habitat pollution, combined with civil unrest present significant threats to the population. In the Sapo National forest, home to the largest population of pygmy hippos, they are officially protected. However, political conflicts and economic pressures make enforcement of conservation laws a low priority.

The Importance of Hippos

Both pygmy and common hippos play an important role on the ecosystems of the African wetlands and the surrounding grasslands and forests.

As common hippos move from their daytime habitat in the rivers and lakes to their nocturnal grazing areas, they can create natural break lines for brush fires. And, by eating the grass, they can stimulate vegetation growth and create a diverse mosaic of habitat for other herbivores.

Common hippos are also pivotal in the continued survival of many birds and fish. As hippos defecate in the water, they provide the nutrients needed to promote the growth of small plants. The plants serve as food and hiding places for small fish. The small fish attract larger fish, and the larger fish attract birds and other fish eating animals.

In Liberia, the role of pygmy hippos is not fully understood. However, they have lived in these forests of tens of thousands of years. Removal of such a species about which so little is known, poses an unacceptable risk to an ecosystem that is already under attack.

Helping the Hippo Population

IUCN Efforts to Protect Hippos

The pressures on hippos have not gone unnoticed. Through the SSC, the Hippo Specialty Group published its Status Survey and Conservation Action Plan in 1993 and conducted a continent-wide census in 2004. These documents report on the distribution, population, threats, and protection to common and pygmy hippos on a country-by-country basis for every nation where they still exist. The Action Plan further outlines a list of objectives and recommendations to ensure the continued persistence of both species of hippos.



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Other Efforts to Protect Hippos

In addition to the IUCN/SSC, organizations such as TRAFFIC and the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) have been supporting the conservation of hippos as well as other animals for more than 20 years.



TRAFFIC is an international wildlife trade monitoring program operating jointly in support of the World Wildlife Fund

(WWF) For Nature and the IUCN. TRAFFIC operates out of 20 countries on five continents and actively monitors and investigates wildlife trade. It provides its information to a diverse worldwide audience as a basis for effective conservation policies and programs.



CITES currently has 160 member nations which have agreed to collectively ban the commercial

international trade of products derived from endangered species and to regulate and monitor trade in products from other species that might become endangered. On January 7, 1975 CITES listed pygmy hippos on Appendix II. This meant that all trade of products made from pygmy hippos was to be regulated and monitored internationally. On February 16, 1995 Common hippos were also added to the Appendix II list.

How to Help

The IUCN/SSC Hippo Group is embarking on an information campaign and research initiative. We hope our web site and newsletter will keep the conservation and public communities aware of research developments and the current status of hippos. We are also working to develop a research fund to advance hippo research by providing financial support to hippo researchers.

This information campaign and research initiative will require support from the conservation community. Thus, we would like to form partnerships with individuals, corporate, and conservation organizations that are committed to wildlife and habitat preservation.

If you would like to become a corporate or individual sponsor of the Hippo Specialist Group, would like to know more about how you can help conservation of hippo species, or are interested in conducting hippo research, please contact: Rebecca Lewison at rebecca.lewison@duke.edu