



## **IUCN/SSC Veterinary Specialist Group**

### **Successes, Challenges and Plans for the Future**

*The IUCN Veterinary Specialist Group is a collaborative multidisciplinary network supporting and promoting the health of wildlife and wildlife management as core components of ecosystem and biodiversity conservation.*

The Veterinary Specialist Group (VSG) is a network of experts in various aspects of wildlife health. In early 2001, Dr's Richard Kock and William Karesh were appointed to cooperatively chair the group after the departure of Dr. Michael Woodford, who led the organization since its inception in 1984. In June 2002, the Co-Chairs organized a VSG Futures Search Workshop. Participants at this meeting helped to define a new vision for the VSG, identify strategies to work toward this vision, and to design a new organizational structure suited to achieve the group's goals by involving more members in decision making and appointing regional coordinators to focus members on relevant issues. The following summer, the VSG Advisory Board (formed at the Futures Meeting) met in Saskatoon, Canada where concrete objectives were developed. These early meetings provided VSG members the first opportunity, under the new leadership team, to discuss the evolving role of wildlife health in conservation.

Since the groups' restructuring in 2002, Veterinary Specialist Group membership has doubled to over 300 members in 50 countries, allowing the SSC to draw upon new areas of expertise and reach out to scientists in previously underrepresented regions. To support this emboldened network, the VSG launched a new website <http://www.iucn-vsg.org> that provides SSC members and the public open access to directly contact specialists for advice via a searchable database, and see updates on recent VSG activities and recommendations on wildlife health and conservation issues.

With the momentum of a renewed vision, the VSG played a key role in helping to lay the scientific foundation for an international animal health and natural resources management initiative called AHEAD – Animal Health for the Environment And Development. This initiative, launched during the IUCN World Parks Congress, was started by The Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS), VSG, the South African region of the Sustainable Use Specialist Group, and other partners in recognition of the importance of animal health to both conservation and development interests.

With increased membership, VSG has also increased its' capacity to advise on both broad and species-specific health issues that arise across the globe and to collaborate with other important health organizations and Specialist Groups within the SSC. In the South Pacific Ocean, the Cetacean Specialist Group and VSG members conducted a site visit and prepared a report in response to widespread public interest in the recent live-capture and export of dolphins from the Solomon Islands. In Africa, VSG worked with the African Lion Working Group and Cat Specialist Group to develop a one-page *FIV in African Lions* Fact Sheet to make accurate, science-based information on this issue available to the media, the public, and decision-makers. Our members assisted IUCN SSC African Elephant Specialist Group in creating *Guidelines for the In Situ Translocation of the African Elephant for Conservation Purposes* (Ed. Holly T. Dublin and Leo S. Niskanen). This guideline is now published and can be obtained as a CD or hard copy from IUCN [Afesg@ssc.iucn.org](mailto:Afesg@ssc.iucn.org) or through the website [www.iucn.org/afesg](http://www.iucn.org/afesg). In Latin America, the VSG assisted the Deer Specialist Group in responding to needs for pampas deer in Uruguay, and in North America, VSG members contributed to a WCS produced guide for USAID project evaluators entitled: *Animal Health Matters: Improving the Health of Wild and Domestic Animals to Enhance Long-Term Development Success in USAID-Assisted Countries* (available on our website). To help manage the recent outbreak of Avian Influenza in Asia, VSG members assisted the UN Food and Agriculture Organization in developing recommendations for controlling the outbreak and posted additional guidelines on the VSG website. A short list of significant disease events that VSG members were involved in responding to can be found on the SSC 2000-2004 Quadrennial CD-Rom.

### **Challenges**

Although the VSG network is a valuable resource for wildlife health information and advice, many Specialist Groups are unaware of VSGs' vast expertise and therefore overlook opportunities for collaboration. VSG members are striving to bridge this gap by reaching out other SSC groups, encouraging members to take a closer look at projects that may include often-neglected issues of wildlife health.

In the past, the Veterinary Specialist Group has primarily filled a network-response role. As we move forward with a more diverse group, we envision taking on a more proactive role in identifying problems, helping to design conservation projects and finding funding for them.

### **Plans for the future**

Capitalizing on its expanding technical, the Group anticipates the being increasingly involved with conservation and health projects that assess the impact of disease on targeted wildlife populations. Additionally, VSG is seeking to directly support pilot studies to examine the health implications of wildlife and livestock interactions that are becoming increasingly common as agriculture and development expand around the globe.

Moving forward, the VSG will continue to disseminate important health information through traditional publications, the VSG website and other web-based systems. Just this year, the VSG and the African Rhino Specialist Group will begin producing translocation guidelines that will be made available in on the web and in print. In 2005, the proceedings from the AHEAD Animal Health Forum, convened at the 2003 World Parks Congress, will be published as an IUCN *Occasional Paper*, bringing important wildlife health and development issues to the forefront. Additionally, VSG is seeking to

provide short symposia for government ministries on wildlife health issues in their region, helping to connect management to on-the-ground conservation.

A regional disparity in project funding often hinders health professionals in developing countries from conducting health projects. In the coming years, VSG members with success in donor relations and grant writing will assist other country members in aligning wildlife health projects with potential sources of funding. VSG aims to hold its first Grantmanship workshop in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia where there is increasing support for strengthening the veterinary infrastructure of wildlife conservation programs but where there is little access to funds for local veterinarians and health specialists. If successful, the training program could serve as a model for funding workshops across the region.

Drawing upon the multidisciplinary capability of the group, the VSG will be co-organizing a session at the World Conservation Congress devoted to mapping out the links between animal health, conservation and human security. This forum will be presented in the context of a global synthesis workshop in the stream; *Health, Poverty and Conservation – Responding to the challenge of human well-being*. The forum, entitled; “One World, One Health: The Threat of Emerging Diseases to Human Security and Conservation, and the Implications for Public Policy” is jointly organized by the IUCN Veterinary Specialist Group, the Wildlife Conservation Society, the IUCN Commission on Environmental Law, the IUCN Commission on Environmental, Economic and Social Policy, the International Institute for Sustainable Development, and the Center for Environmental Legal Studies of Pace University School of Law. This symposium will emphasize one of VSG’s main tenets, that animal health and human health are fundamentally connected.

*Richard Kock and William Karesh, Co-Chairs*

## **Annex**

**Table 1 : VSG member assistance in significant disease issues**

**SARS** – members participate in outbreak investigations with Chinese gov. and WHO  
**Avian Influenza** – response guidance with UNFAO and OIE  
**Ebola** – members participate in investigations with Congolese gov. and WHO  
**Foot and Mouth Disease** – response guidance with Mongolia gov.  
**Tuberculosis and FMD** – collaborations with local and regional authorities in southern Africa  
**Anthrax** – members participate in investigations with Ivory Coast gov.  
**Rabies** – advice to Canid Sp. Grp. in response for Ethiopian wolf  
**Diclofenac related vulture decline** in South Asia – members participate in investigations with gov. authorities.