

Saving Sandfish project update: September 2021

It's been a busy last couple months on the sandfish front, and I would like to take this opportunity to share with you some of the new developments and highlights that have recently unfolded.

How local donor and landowner support is helping fuel the project

To begin, I want to acknowledge a number of generous recent donations that have been invaluable to the project – support that has enabled us to get out into the field at critical times to document and study this year's spawning migration, and to tag and release bass-proof sandfish from last year's rescue. These donations also help build project sustainability beyond the relatively short time frames of typical conservation grants.



To all of those individuals and organisations who have donated to the project, and to the wonderful landowners of the Biedouw Valley who have gone out of their way to accommodate us – a massive thank you from the Saving Sandfish team!

New grant from IUCN Save Our Species

In addition to the above-mentioned donations, I am pleased to share that we have been successful in an application for a one-year SOS Rapid Action Grant that will

help support project activities and equipment purchases over the next year.

New PhD student Cecilia Cerrilla on board

Defensible scientific research is a critical for better-understanding sandfish life history, population status and threats, as well as for measuring the effectiveness of the conservation actions being done through this project. Cecilia aka 'Ceci' has spent most of the last six weeks stationed in the Biedouw meticulously documenting the arrival, spawning and retreat of adult sandfish.



2021 Sandfish spawning migration

Following a hefty cold front that covered several Cederberg peaks in snow in late August, the Biedouw River experienced a substantial pulse of flow that triggered the migration of 150+ sandfish.



The fish, some of which exceeded 50cm in length, spent their first few days in the Biedouw settling into pools, waiting and preparing to spawn.



As the flows subsided, a series of warm days in early September appeared to trigger the spawning – which started with fish moving from their staging pools into nearby riffles in late afternoon. Ceci and her assistant Lloyd were there to collect detailed data on spawning sites and behaviours for three evenings in a row. The fish spawned late into the night, becoming bolder as darkness set in, allowing us to observe and document their behavior at very close range.

Sandfish tagging and release

Ceci is also overseeing the tagging and releasing of sandfish from the sanctuary dams back into the Biedouw.



The rescued fish in the dams have grown from ~5cm when rescued in November 2020 to 15-20cm at the time of release ten months later – a size that should put them outside of the predation window of most alien fish.

To date, a total of 1274 bass-proof (>15 cm) fish have been released, 995 of which have been tagged using PIT tags.



These tiny tags will allow us to track the survival and movement of these fish, and importantly reveal whether they return to the Biedouw during the spawning migration next year.



In the pipeline

Filmmaker and storyteller extraordinaire Otto Whitehead has been putting in long hours at the edit suite and is now adding the final touches to the much-anticipated

Episode 4 of the [Saving Sandfish web series](#). This episode chronicles the 2020 spawning migration as seen through the eyes of researchers, photographers, fishermen and Biedouw Valley residents, and promises to be an assault on the freshwater senses. The episode is scheduled for release later this month and will be screened at the upcoming [Arid Zone Ecology Forum](#) next month.

We also have a National Geographic online photo story about the project scheduled for release next month, which will help share the sandfish story with a global audience.

Next steps

It's going to be a busy next few months as we gear up for this year's 'sandfish rescue in November. In 2021 we are aiming to rescue 10 000 sandfish from the Biedouw and work with some new landowners to create some new sandfish sanctuaries in the catchment. We will also be undertaking an updated survey of the Doring River and selected tributaries - the first since 2013 - to build an updated picture of the sandfish population status and distribution range.



Resources for partners and donors

Next month (once the Nat Geo article is published) we will be setting up a shared online folder containing a selection of project

images and other resources that will be freely accessible to all project partners and donors.



*Warm wishes,
Jeremy & the Saving Sandfish team*