

# Sharing Lessons, Meeting Challenges

by Curt Meine

"So how are the cranes doing?"

Every crane conservationist grows accustomed to that question, and struggles to answer it. The simple answer is that some populations and species have fared well in recent decades, some have fared worse, and most face serious continuing threats. When ICF opened its doors 25 years ago, 7 of the 15 species of cranes were considered threatened. Recent data from the world's crane experts, as well as advances in our understanding of conservation risks, suggest that as many as 11 species should now be considered threatened.

Although this news is sobering, it reflects the fact that our foundation of knowledge is much stronger than it was in 1973. At that time, little was known about the numbers, distribution, and ecology of many species of cranes. Since then, dozens of researchers have made monumental contributions to our information base, allowing for more accurate evaluation of the status of the cranes. ICF has played a key role in building that foundation. In turn, however, this process has only intensified ICF's challenge to work more effectively.

Cranes are only one group of birds on a planet whose rich legacy of biological diversity is under increasing pressures from its human population. And ICF is only one of many organizations mobilizing to conserve that legacy. Although such global phenomena as population growth, habitat destruction, and climate change can seem daunting, ICF's experience has shown that it is possible to develop responses that



The migratory flock of Whooping Cranes has made a dramatic recovery from 15 birds in 1941 to 181 birds during the winter of 1997-98. Photo by Carl-Albrecht v. Treuenfels

benefit not only wild creatures, but the people who share their habitats. ICF's mission focuses on the world's 15 crane species, but it embraces five continents, a wide spectrum of habitats, watersheds great and small, and the innumerable human communities with which cranes interact and coexist.

One of the most important lessons that conservationists have learned in recent years is that it takes many actions, employing diverse fields of knowledge, to meet the long-term needs of people and wildlife in particular places. ICF is highly unusual in the degree to which it uses all the available "tools" of conservation, from habitat protection to captive rearing and reintroduction, from community development and education to research and training. Whether we are dealing with the problems of rare Siberian Cranes along their remote migration routes, or the

recovery of Sandhill Crane populations in our Wisconsin "backyard," all of these tools are important. Coordinating such a broad range of activities is not easy, but it is necessary. ICF has been a leader in this integrated approach to conservation, providing a model for other conservation organizations.

So how are the cranes doing? They are surviving—tentatively in some cases, tenaciously in others. As we look into the next century, we can see that the challenges to the survival of cranes are unlikely to diminish. But ICF has always served as an example of what is possible when imagination, knowledge, and dedication come together in the cause of conservation. As long as ICF retains those qualities, it will continue to serve as an example, and to meet those challenges. ■

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