

# Plan for Reserves in Oman

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The proposal for a national park in Jebel Akhdar, in Oman, described in *Oryx*, November 1974, has been carried a stage further by a scientific survey made in April 1975 with the fullest support from the Oman Government. Originally the park was designed to protect the Arabian tahr *Hemitragus jayakari*, but so few survive in the area that the authors have recommended that, while the park plan should go forward, thus giving the survivors full protection, another reserve should be made the major conservation area for tahr.

In April 1975 a full scientific survey of the proposed national park in Jebel Akhdar was carried out by a party of five naturalists, on behalf of the Sultan of Oman and his Government. Our expedition, the Oman Flora and Fauna Survey 1975, was financed by the Oman Government, which provided transport, including helicopters and a monoplane of the Omani Police to facilitate aerial survey and photography. The five members were Dr David L. Harrison (mammalogy); Major M.D. Gallagher (ornithology, herpetology, ichthyology conchology); James P. Mandaville Jr. (botany); P. Granville White (entomology) and G.C.D. Harrison (photography). Our principal task was to make as full a scientific survey of the whole flora and fauna of the Jebel Akhdar park area as possible, but this was expanded to include the examination of a second area in the Jabel Aswad, south of Muscat, where the discovery of some surviving tahr *Hemitragus jayakari* had led to the establishment of an experimental tahr reserve, supervised by Major David Insall, with a staff of five Beduin wardens appointed and paid by the Oman Government. As we had only one month in the field we devoted the major part of our time to an altitudinal survey of the flora and fauna of the Jebel Akhdar, ending with six days in the Jebel Aswad.

Our main route crossed the proposed park from north to south, passing over the main range between Rostaq and Al Hamra, ascending by Wadi Sahtan and descending by Wadi Misfah. The main range could only be crossed on foot with Beduin guides, and using donkeys to transport the baggage. Six camps were established on Jebel Akhdar at altitudes ranging from 1500 to 7000 feet. At each we stayed several days to study the fauna and flora making surveys on foot up to 9000 feet and visiting the summit area by helicopter. The whole park area was examined from the air. Our seventh and final camp was set up for six days in Wadi Qid to survey the Wadi Serin Reserve, and here also the high plateau of Jebel Aswad was visited by helicopter.

We thus gathered a considerable amount of scientific material which is now being analysed; the detailed results will be published this year in a special number of the new *Journal of Omani Studies*.

The most important immediate result of the expedition is that we have been able to make strong recommendations to the Oman Government that both the Jebel Akhdar National Park and the Jebel Aswad Tahr Reserve should be proceeded with. The Jebel Akhdar is an area of exceptional scenic beauty, with a variety of plant and animal life of great intrinsic interest to naturalists as an area of relict flora and fauna, although the tahr itself is now clearly very scarce there. Local reports suggest that it still survives and with adequate local

protection there is good reason to hope that the local population would recover, but we concluded that the tahr's immediate future would be best safeguarded by devoting available resources to the Jebel Aswad Reserve where a reasonable population survives and is known to be breeding. Although quite near Muscat the human population is small and the escarpment where the tahr live is composed of precipitous and inaccessible cliffs, so that there is little disturbance and minimal hunting. The only natural predators are occasional wolves and possibly panther. The young wardens recruited from the local villages are keen and enthusiastic, but the difficult task of preventing what poaching there is would be greatly assisted by the provision of wireless sets for easier communication. As a result of our survey we now have a good understanding of the plant communities on which the tahr feed, and it was encouraging to find that both in Jebel Aswad and Jebel Akhdar there is little ecological disturbance by livestock grazing.

Attempts to rear young tahr in captivity with a view to establishing a nucleus captive herd have unfortunately failed. Young animals prove to be exceptionally delicate, succumbing rapidly to infections, and it seems that such attempts must be abandoned until we know more about this little-known animal. Meanwhile all efforts must be concentrated on its preservation in the wild. The improvement of the habitat by provision of new waterholes in selected areas is considered to be important, and expert advice is being sought through WWF.

The enthusiastic welcome given to our party in Oman and the splendid material support we received from the Oman Government at all stages are things we shall always remember with gratitude. The solid progress so far made with our plans would have been quite impossible without this unstinted help. We particularly wish to express our thanks to HM Sultan Qaboos bin Said bin Taimur, also to the Minister of Diwan Affairs and his staff, especially R.H. Daly, Adviser to the Minister on the Preservation and Development of the Environment in Rural Oman. Major D.H. Insall, whose initiative has been largely responsible for the development of the Jebel Aswad Reserve, gave us very great assistance in our work, as also did Major Michael Baddeley. We would also like to record our gratitude to all the many Omani people who so generously gave us their enthusiastic help and hospitality during our travels.

**Postscript:** IUCN/WWF have approved a two-year project for the Arabian tahr in Oman with an expert to study the animal and advise on the management of the tahr reserve. The Oman Ministry of Diwan Affairs will be responsible for the back-up for the expert and will also double the warden force in the reserve.

### Reference

HARRISON D.L. and GALLAGHER M.D. 1974. A park to save the Arabian tahr. *Oryx* 12 (5): 547-49.

## Turtles on the Coromandel Coast

On the Coromandel coast of south-east India the fishermen 'are good friends of the olive ridley turtles', say S. Valliapan and Romulus Whitaker in a report published by the Madras Snake Park. They regard the turtle *Lepidochelys olivacea* as a god, and if they catch one in their nets usually return it to the sea; they do not eat or sell the eggs unless fish is scarce, when they collect what they need, not more, and leave some eggs 'to keep the race going'. The turtles' main predators are jackals and dogs - of 40 nests found robbed in one place these predators were responsible for 34; the rest had been robbed by humans.

## Wilderness – is it ‘Useless’?

**The belief that land which does not yield an obvious financial return is ‘useless’ was challenged by Dr Paul Leyhausen at the IUCN Technical Meetings in Zaire in the discussion following a paper, by Dr Tumaini Mcharo:**

Dr Mcharo asks how much longer can governments keep vast areas of land ‘remote from the people’ in the form of national parks? The question is prompted by the belief that all land, especially wilderness is ‘useless’ if it does not yield an obvious return or visible advantage. But governments have to maintain many institutions and services which are ‘remote from the people’; universities are both inaccessible and more or less incomprehensible to the majority of people; armies are totally unproductive, even wasteful. Yet in the long run even pure research, the results of which have no practical application, benefits the community, and in our lamentably unsafe world armies ‘produce’ that atmosphere of security and peace – or at least the illusion of it which serves the purpose almost as well – without which the community’s other social, political and economic activities could not be properly performed.

In the case of wilderness, the benefit is far from illusory; it is extremely real. The remaining wilderness areas of the world, the ecologically still more or less undisturbed parts, are (apart from the great oceans) the most efficient recycling factories of this planet. They absorb and neutralise our wastes, they regulate our climate and water regime, all without any running or maintenance costs. The soundest investment any community or nation can possibly make is not to attempt to derive any other, more direct or visible revenue from them. One can even put a figure to it. In my own overexploited, ecologically completely devastated country, West Germany, we have to spend directly or indirectly, something in the order of one-third of our national productivity to mend or forestall pollution and environmental degradation of all kinds, in order to maintain a mere modicum of environmental viability. In other words, one-third of the time we are working to neutralise the damage we inflict with the rest of our work! A sufficiently large proportion of wilderness in our country would save us the expense, the work, and the heart attacks.

For too long conservationists have been extolling the benefits of conservation as ‘national heritage’ to be preserved for the future generations, or as hard-currency earning from tourism etc. These are good reasons by themselves, but we are curiously blind to the incalculably vast, direct economic value of wilderness *per se*, and therefore have unforgivably omitted to drive the point home that it is sheer economic survival and therefore ultimately also the physical survival of the human species which is at stake.

It is often argued that especially the poor countries could not afford to leave wilderness alone. In fact even less than the so-called rich countries can they afford to destroy it. Nor can the world at large, the human community, afford to let them do it. Wilderness areas are the economically soundest investment any community can make.

Moreover, large wilderness areas on either side of international borders could protect peace and prevent unauthorised entrance far more effectively than barbed wire, watch towers, mines and all the rest of that expensive junk ever could; and it would be a lot cheaper!