

EDITORIAL

We are now starting our sixth year and we would once again like to express our gratitude to RAK Bank for their continued support of Wildlife Middle East News. April of this year saw our long standing colleagues Dr Tom Bailey and his wife Theri return to the UK with their family to start a new life there; we wish them well. While not here in person, Tom and Theri will still be integral to the Newsletter, but their absence is being felt already (no one to whip us into line and get the Newsletter to bed on time).

News from the Middle East is unfortunately dominated with the unrest in a number of countries in the region and our thoughts go out to all those caught up in the suffering. One wonders, leaving aside the human tragedy, what the long term effects will be on the many conservation initiatives in these countries. The Foundation for the Protection of the Arabian Leopard, in Yemen, continues its fantastic work, going from strength to strength. Also in Yemen, the National Avian Research Centre (based in Abu Dhabi), has been conducting field research on the Arabian bustard. They report in this issue on their initiative to get security officers and school children involved in the bustards conservation through education programmes which they have been running.

Perhaps one of the most interesting news stories recently was the downgrading of the Arabian oryx (*Oryx leucoryx*) from Endangered to Vulnerable. The Arabian oryx makes history by being the first species once listed as Extinct in the Wild to have improved by three threat categories. Indeed, the IUCN estimates there are more than 1,000 Arabian Oryx in the wild, with 6,000-7,000 held in captivity worldwide in zoos, preserves, and private collections. The many release programmes in the range states and the subsequent monitoring policies put in place have shown that reintroduction is a viable option.

There still remains, however, one major obstacle to the success of these projects, as witnessed with the release in the Arabian Oryx Sanctuary in Oman. There is still a demand for these animals in private collections in the region which has in the past led to the wide-scale poaching and mortality of the oryx from 'protected' areas. Why is this necessary when we have up to 7,000 in captivity? Most captive collections have overpopulation problems and often have to set up bachelor herds of surplus males that cannot be kept with the main herd because of fighting. Could more be done to facilitate exchange and distribution of these animals?

A solution might be that some of these 7,000 captive animals are made available to organisations or individuals who want them. Each organisation requesting animals would have to meet strict criteria suitable for the species. These standards could be vetted by a committee comprising members drawn from internationally accredited bodies (e.g. in this region EAZA accredited facilities). Finally, recommendations on which animals are moved can be made by the Arabian Oryx General Secretariat.

This system need not be limited to Arabian oryx and could be rolled out to cover many other species in the region. This policy would prove successful on two fronts. Firstly, it reduces the need for illegal animals. Money which would have been spent on the animal can now be channelled into creating suitable holding areas and increasing animal welfare such as that described in the environmental enrichment programmes in Al Ain Wildlife Park and Resort (this issue), as well as improved veterinary and husbandry care. Secondly, it would push forward the idea and need (as covered in a number of previous WME News articles) for a Regional Zoo/Animal Collection Association to drive forward animal welfare in the many different collections in the region.

WILDLIFE MIDDLE EAST NEWS OBJECTIVES

- Raising awareness of environmental and conservation issues affecting wildlife in the Middle East.
- Distributing information to enable better management healthcare and welfare of wildlife.
- Providing a central contact point for practical advice and information on wildlife management in the region.

More controversial ideas for use of the animals might also include controlled hunting or farming for meat? Those of us involved with managing oryx in captivity, know how supremely adapted they are to surviving and multiplying in an arid environment. As oryx are now protected, in the future the problem will not be extinction, it will be overpopulation. Sustainable harvesting of oryx may be an option.

All this provides food for thought. However, we digress from the contents of the latest issue! In addition to articles already mentioned, great contributions in this issue cover surveys on illegal bird trapping in Iraq, and surveys of insects in the UAE, a project to revitalise the River Jordan, a review of reptile lighting and a taster of the Wild Arabia exhibition soon to open in Abu Dhabi.

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