

# Ten Years of Conservation Workshops for the Fauna of Arabia 2000-2009

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**Abstract:** A series of annual conservation workshops on the fauna of the Arabian Peninsula was initiated in 2000 under the patronage of His Highness the Ruler of Sharjah. The 10 workshops held to date have brought together many experts from across the region and outside, fostering co-operation and assessing the regional status of several taxonomic groups. The Arabian Leopard has been a major topic and a region-wide conservation strategy has been produced. The workshops have also produced the first assessment of Arabian freshwater habitats and since 2007 protected areas have formed an important topic.

**Key words:** Arabian biodiversity, Sharjah, conservation workshops, protected areas

## Introduction

Recognising that networking and information sharing are pivotal in addressing major regional threats to biodiversity, His Highness Sheikh Dr Sultan bin Mohamed Al Qasimi, Supreme Council Member and Ruler of Sharjah hosted the first Conservation Workshop for the Fauna of Arabia at the Breeding Centre for Endangered Arabian Wildlife (BCEAW) in February 2000. Annual conservation workshops have been held since then under the auspices of the Sharjah Environment and Protected Areas Authority (EPAA). These meetings have become an important annual event, bringing together regional and international scientists and conservationists to discuss the status, threats, challenges and the future of biodiversity conservation in the Arabian Peninsula.

Ten workshops took place between 2000 and 2009, and were attended by a total of 316 people from 41 countries, including all those in the Arabian Peninsula (Fig. 1), others in the wider Middle East and outside the region. There has been regular involvement from IUCN Species Survival Commission, including direct participation by the IUCN/SSC Antelope, Canid, Cat, Conservation Breeding, Reintroduction, and Rodent Specialist Groups.

## Species assessments

Workshops have reviewed the current distribution and status of selected taxonomic groups at the regional level (Table 1), to assess threats and recommend conservation actions. In total, 203 species have been assessed including mammals (almost all species except bats and marine mammals), birds (raptors and shorebirds), snakes, amphibians and fish and major groups of freshwater invertebrates (Fig. 2). All results were published in annual workshop reports (CBSG 2000, 2001, EPAA 2002-2007; SEDDON et al. 2008, 2009, PORTER et al. 2009).

Table 1. Species groups assessed at the Sharjah Conservation Workshops 2000-2009.

Group	Years
Mammals	2000-2007
Birds	2005, 2006, 2009
Snakes	2008
Amphibians	2003
Freshwater Fish	2003-2004
Aquatic Invertebrates	2005

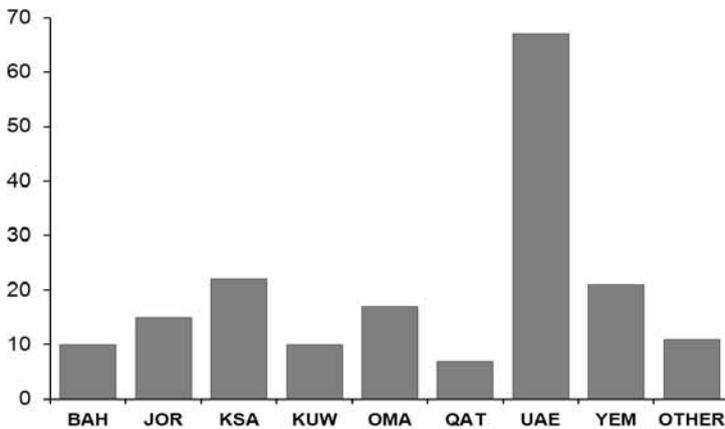


Fig. 1. The number of regional delegates attending the Sharjah Conservation Workshops 2000-2009.

### Arabian Leopard

The Critically Endangered Arabian Leopard *Panthera pardus nimr* was a focus of the first Sharjah workshop in the year 2000, and continued to feature regularly at the annual meetings. These discussions culminated in the production of a range-wide Arabian Leopard Status Report in 2006, published jointly by EPAA and the IUCN/SSC Cat Specialist Group as *Cat News Special Issue No. 1*.

The 2007 workshop was preceded by a special planning meeting that brought together experts from the range states to formulate a conservation strategy for the Arabian leopard. This range-wide strategy (BREITENMOSER et al. 2010) was published by EPAA. It represents a milestone in the leopard's recovery, and with endorsement by national governments it will guide development of national action plans across the Arabian Peninsula.

Another important outcome of the Arabian leopard workshops has been improved regional cooperation between all organisations concerned, including enhancing the Arabian Leopard Captive Breeding Program by facilitating animal transfers and information exchange, and thereby providing a "safety net" for the wild population. Capacity building, rapid assessment surveys and technical assistance carried out by the BCEAW in Saudi Arabia and Yemen are other important outcomes of the workshops.



Fig. 2. The Critically Endangered Arabian Leopard *Panthera pardus nimr* was a focus of the first Sharjah workshop in the year 2000, and continued to feature regularly at the annual meetings.

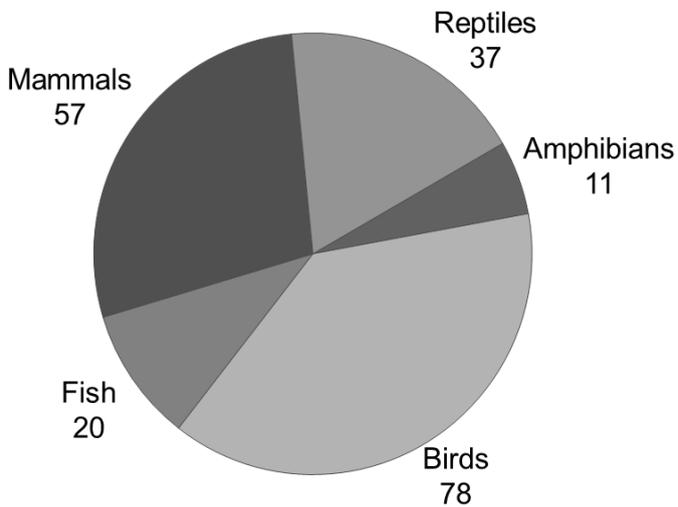


Fig. 3. Numbers of species assessed at the Sharjah Conservation Workshops 2000-2009.



Fig. 4. *Garra smarti* Krupp & Budd, 2009, a cyprinid fish that was described from Wadi Hasik, Dhofar Province, Oman, only in 2009.

### Freshwater Ecosystems

Freshwater ecosystems are a naturally rare and declining resource in the Arabian Peninsula, but of great biodiversity value due to the number of restricted-range endemic species they contain. A comprehensive review of the status of the freshwater fauna was carried out in a series of three linked assessments during the 2003–2005 workshops, covering amphibians, fish and invertebrates. Outputs included: development of a working classification of freshwater habitats in the Arabian Peninsula; identification of the most important sites for freshwater fauna and future conservation; review of the regional status of all amphibian and fish species; and selection of invertebrate species from prominent groups to act as indicators.

### Protected Areas

During the first seven workshops, one of the most important regional issues to emerge was the need for adequate areas of suitable habitat to support viable wildlife populations. A strong annual theme since 2007 has been Protected Areas. Core topics discussed have included: a review of the current Protected Area Network in the Arabian Peninsula; evaluation of management effectiveness; the traditional concept of *hema*; and identifying priority sites for establishment of transboundary conservation areas. A second over-arching theme also featuring since 2007 concerns the implications for biodiversity of global climate change.

## Conclusions

The Arabian Peninsula lies at the crossroads of Eurasia and Africa and is thus an important bridge for migratory species, but also contains valuable populations of flora and fauna from both regions, in addition to many endemic species and unique habitats. For millennia the natural balance was unaffected by largely subsistence human activities, habitat loss or degradation was limited and species extinctions were few.

But perhaps more than any other region in the world the Arabian Peninsula has seen massive social and environmental change in only the last 50 years. As a consequence there is now a wide variation in the status and provisions for wildlife conservation across the region. Larger mammals are now mainly confined to protected areas, and two have become extinct in the last few decades. On the positive side, the region has been a leader in reintroduction efforts, notably of Arabian Oryx *Oryx leucoryx* and Houbara *Chlamydotis mcqueenii*. Clearly there are important lessons to be shared by the countries of the region and there remains great scope for enhanced international cooperation to enhance conservation management and achieve shared objectives.

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