

Re-introductions in today's Arabian Peninsula: The first steps for a grander vision?

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Abstract. This paper is a personal view, deriving from the knowledge base of the Arabian Peninsula's fauna, the record on re-introduction of Arabian Oryx and Houbara Bustard, and selective conservation actions for the region's species, to propose an ambitious vision for restoring the region's key ecosystems through re-wilding, a holistic approach for biodiversity conservation. It is argued that the need is urgent and the time is right, and that various circumstances and opportunities are now favourable. The prospect is for the Arabian Peninsula to maintain its roles as home to specialised species, to continue to act as a sanctuary and crossroads for species from three major neighbouring biological realms, and to be a potential refuge in the face of climate change.

Key words. challenge, re-wilding, predation, ecosystem processes, attitudes, society.

Introduction

The 2010 Sharjah conference built on the far-sighted initiative of ten years ago to take a systematic approach to making inventories of the fauna of the Arabian Peninsula, as a basis for its rational and planned conservation. The results have been the annual Sharjah workshops in each of the subsequent ten years. The 2010 conference was designed to take the information arising from these workshops "to look forward and to explore how and what has been learned and achieved, and inform and guide future conservation challenges for the Arabian Peninsula."

Hence, there is reason and justification to be creative about the future, to propose a vision, to challenge conventional thinking in pursuit of effective, lasting conservation of the biodiversity of the Arabian Peninsula. The author's credentials for tackling this subject derive from his being the first Field Manager (1979-1987) of the Sultanate of Oman's project to re-introduce the Arabian Oryx *Oryx leucoryx* to the wild, subsequently founder-chair of the IUCN Species Survival Commission's Re-introduction Specialist Group (RSG), and currently a Conservation Fellow at the Al Ain Wildlife Park and Reserve while leading an RSG activity to develop new IUCN guidelines and policy on the prospects for deliberately moving plants and animals outside their current ranges as a means to avoid the anticipated impacts of climate change or other major disruptions.

Against this background, this paper will present two contradictory observations, followed by a prospect to be avoided, and finally a challenge for biodiversity conservation in the Arabian Peninsula.