

ARAB STATES

AL-AHSA OASIS, AN EVOLVING CULTURAL LANDSCAPE

SAUDI ARABIA

WORLD HERITAGE NOMINATION – IUCN COMMENTS TO ICOMOS

AL-AHSA OASIS, AN EVOLVING CULTURAL LANDSCAPE (SAUDI ARABIA)

IUCN considered this cultural landscape based on a desk review of the nomination and the comments of two external desk reviewers to provide inputs to ICOMOS on the natural components of this property. These reviews were also shared directly with ICOMOS in order to contribute to their detailed reflections on this nomination. The evaluation of the nomination for the World Heritage Committee will be finalised by ICOMOS.

The property is nominated under criteria (iii), (iv) and (v) and is made of twelve separate components covering a total area of 8,544 hectares with a buffer zone made of seven separate zones covering a total area of 21,556 hectares. The total area of the national serial site is 30,100 ha.

The Oasis is definitely a place of long established interaction between people and nature. The origin of the oasis is based on the human attempt to utilize the abundance of water to transform natural landscapes into liveable areas using primarily agriculture as a source of living and settlement in a very harsh desert environment.

The oasis as a cultural landscape cannot be separated from its natural ecosystems, biodiversity and wildlife associated with the wetland ecosystems themselves as well as the surrounding desert ecosystems.

Available studies suggest that the natural environment within and surrounding the oasis components especially the ones with a more natural state (e.g. Al Asfar Lake) is of significant importance to biodiversity, wildlife and local communities livelihoods. This is confirmed by the fact that Al-Hasa Lagoons is recorded in the Directory of Wetlands in the Middle East (Scott 1995). The lagoons have been also identified as an Important Bird Area by BirdLife International (BirdLife International 2017). Furthermore, the nomination dossier repeatedly mentions the importance of Al Ahsa ecosystems in the evolution of the Oasis. “River networks continue to flow underground and contribute, along with condensation, to the preservation of humidity in the sand creating a special ecology enabling specific life forms and adapted biodiversity to extreme situations” (nomination file p96). “Al-Ahsa, with its water availability, its geographical location and, above all, its varied environmental context (tree savannah, extreme desert, swamps and lagoons) was for three thousand years an ideal site for this pre-oasis culture. The great biodiversity, the presence of different ecotones, niches and micro specific environments, had a reflection of cultural diversity, such as the development of the different skills needed in each case” (nomination file p160).

IUCN desk reviews recommend promoting studies of the biodiversity associated with the oasis, a wetland with surrounding aeolian fields dunes and sabkha ecosystems. This would reveal the importance of the biodiversity living in the oasis itself and the environments surrounding it, and the role of local people which should be better known or better specified in order to better manage the natural components of their oasis. The desk reviews further highlight the strong human-nature interactions including the effects of anthropogenic impacts. In their view, if well managed, the biodiversity and local communities of the oasis can become very successful, from the point of view of nature conservation and sustainable local development.

IUCN notes the need for the management of the oasis to include a specific component of studying, understanding, monitoring and conserving the biodiversity of the oasis as an integral part of its heritage protection and sustainability. Focus should be given to the biodiversity within the oasis as well as surrounding it. Regular monitoring of the water quality in main water bodies of significance to waterfowl and other related biodiversity groups is also deemed important for the maintenance of natural habitats of the property. The above suggested measures need to take into account the past, current and foreseen impacts of climate change on key ecosystem services provided by the property.

IUCN further thinks that the role of local communities in understanding and conserving the natural environment through their long established traditional knowledge and experience including those related to traditional agricultural practices is incorporated into the oasis governance system as well as the site presentation, promotion and development strategies and plans.