

WORLD HERITAGE NOMINATION - IUCN SUMMARY

654: JIDDAT AL HARASIS AND ADJOINING AREAS (SULTANATE OF OMAN)

Summary prepared by WCMC (February 1993) based on the original nomination submitted by the Government of the Sultanate of Oman. This original and all documents presented in support of this nomination will be available for consultation at the meetings of the Bureau and the Committee.

1. LOCATION

Within the central region of Oman. The nearest large settlement is Haima to the west. To the southwest are the Rima and Marmul centres of oil extraction.

2. JURIDICAL DATA

Existing legislation includes Decree No. 26 providing authority to establish national parks and nature reserves; and ministerial decision No. 40 of 1976 declaring the protection of selected species. Additional legislation relevant to the site includes laws requiring that all development programmes should be preceded by environmental impact studies for the approval of the Ministry of Regional Municipalities and Environment.

3. IDENTIFICATION

Covering approximately 27,000 km², the Jiddat al Harasis is a plateau at 100-150m. Throughout the region there are some slightly sloping drainage plains, coastal escarpments and alluvial plains. The plateau is bounded on the east by a 100m escarpment, the adjacent Huqf depression is separated from the sea coast by the Janabah Hills which rise to 300m. The geology consists mainly of karst limestone, effectively forming the plains of Jiddat al Harasis. Rainfall is monsoonal, occurs from June to October, at very low levels of approximately 10mm. Localised fog raises the humidity in some areas. The greater part of the area is sparsely vegetated.

4. STATE OF PRESERVATION/CONSERVATION:

The fauna of the region is typical of the Arabian peninsula. Notable species include the caracal, the wild cat and the ratel. Hares are found throughout the Jidda'. Hedgehogs are widespread but rarely seen and Arabian wolf (V) is occasionally reported. The Arabian oryx (E) has been reintroduced into the region, and is the largest indigenous mammal species inhabiting the Jidda'.

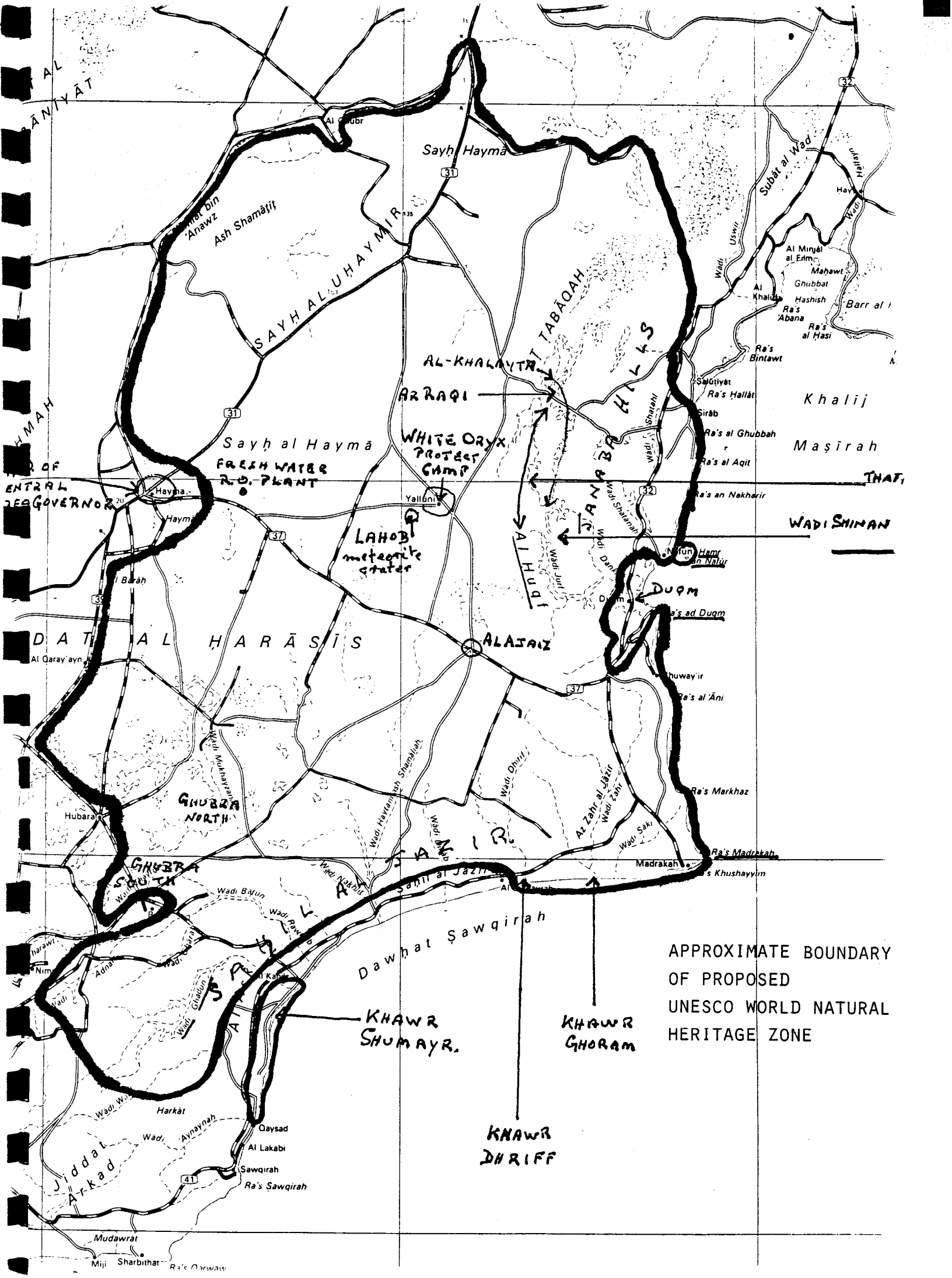
The birds recorded over a six year period on the Jidda' total 168 species, including houbara bustard (V). The small saline and brackish springs act as important vegetated oasis areas, attracting a variety of birds and mammals. They are also habitat for a small indigenous fish species.

5. JUSTIFICATION FOR INCLUSION ON THE WORLD HERITAGE LIST:

The nomination, as presented by the government of the Sultanate of Oman, provides the following justification for designation as a World Heritage property:

Natural property

- (i) **Outstanding examples representing the major stages of the earth's evolutionary history** It is a complex of physical formations and processes and biological communities which are of outstanding universal value from both the aesthetic and scientific points of view.
- (ii) **Outstanding examples representing ongoing geological processes and biological evolution.** The four land units included in the area together provide a complex of outstanding highly exposed geological formations and geomorphological processes.
- (iii) **Contains unique, rare or superlative natural phenomena, formations or features of exceptional natural beauty** The property contains the only surviving free-ranging and viable oryx population in the world.
- (iv) **Contains the most important and significant habitats where threatened species of plants and animals still survive.** The property includes geological and physiographical formations which precisely delineate the natural habitat of the endangered oryx.



APPROXIMATE BOUNDARY
OF PROPOSED
UNESCO WORLD NATURAL
HERITAGE ZONE

KHAWR
SHUMAYR.

KHAWR
GHORAM

KHAWR
DHARRIF

WORLD HERITAGE NOMINATION - IUCN TECHNICAL EVALUATION

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1. DOCUMENTATION

- i) IUCN/WCMC Data Sheet (7 references).
- ii) Additional Literature Consulted: Stanley Price, M. 1989, **Animal Reintroductions: The Arabian Oryx in Oman**; Anon. 1989, Arabian Oryx Workshop Proceedings; Tear T.H. 1992, Range Use Patterns and the Development of a Natural Grazing System in Reintroducing Arabian Oryx in Oman, M.Sc. thesis, University of Idaho; Spalton, A. in press, A brief History of the Reintroduction of the Arabian Oryx, International Zoo Yearbook, 1993; Jungius, H. The Arabian Oryx. J. Oman Studies, 8 (1).
- iii) Consultations: 7 outside reviewers, Government of Oman officials, Project Oryx staff.
- iv) Field Visit: March 25 - 2 April. J. Thorsell.

2. COMPARISON WITH OTHER AREAS

Within the entire Arabian Desert Biogeographical Province there are just over 100 established protected areas, none of which, however, are categorized as national parks in the United Nations List of National Parks and Protected Areas. The nominated area itself is not an established protected area, it is a legally undefined zone with the Arabian Oryx reintroduction site at its centre. Although the site has been nominated on the basis of all 4 natural criteria, the existence of the only free-ranging herd of oryx in the wild is the main basis of the nomination.

The historic range of the Arabian Oryx recently extended from Sinai to Iraq and virtually all through the Arabian peninsula. Intense hunting pressure over the past hundred years (where as many as 300 vehicles were used to chase the animals) resulted in their extirpation throughout this range by 1972 and only zoo populations remained. In 1980, a reintroduction project began in the Jiddat which has now successfully resulted in an expanding herd of some 150 oryx which came from captive stock. Worldwide there are a total of some 1,100 Arabian Oryx, all in captive environments (USA (320), Europe (60), Asia (20), Morocco (12), Middle East (700)) except for this wild population in the Jiddat. Two other significant sites with reintroduction programs are in the Shaumari Reserve in Jordan (100 animals) and in a fenced sanctuary near Taif in Saudi Arabia. There are plans to have a second wild population at Harrat al Harrah in Saudi Arabia. In terms of oryx, then, the site is unique in having an unfenced population, though one or two others may eventually complement it.

In comparison to other desert habitats in the region the Jiddat is noted for several features. One is for a particularly healthy population of Arabian Gazelle, another herbivore in the region that has been much reduced by hunting. Its diversity of avifauna is high (168 species) and includes the endangered houbara bustard. It also contains evidence of glacial activity (300 million years ago) with two well preserved glacial pavements. There are many other areas of desert landscape in Arabia that are more dramatic (e.g. Wadi Rum Biosphere Reserve in Jordan) and other desert sites

that display a range of desert ecological features (e.g. Wahiba sands). There are also many other areas that experience the same occult precipitation phenomenon. There are other sites within Oman (e.g. Jabal Samhan in Dhofar) that some reviewers considered more outstanding. Other World Heritage sites in desert areas are: Ayer Rock (Australia), Aïr Ténéré (Niger), Tassili (Algeria), and Banc d'Arguin (Mauritania).

Culturally, the Harasis people who live in the area are distinct from other nomadic Bedu in some ways but here, as elsewhere, traditional practices are gradually being replaced. Cultural criteria were not a feature of the nomination.

In summary, along with the Northern Wildlife Management Area in Saudi Arabia, the Jiddat area would be one of the two largest protected areas in the region and one of the only two that would have wild populations of Arabian Oryx. It has a range of other natural values that also add to the variety of attractions in the site but most of these are matched elsewhere in the region. It is clearly important on a national scale and has the potential to be one of the most important sites for conservation in the region. (There are also several other sites in Oman for which the same could be said).

3. INTEGRITY

Although the wildlife of the Jiddat are in part protected and managed under the Arabian Oryx Reintroduction Project which enforces Oman's existing wildlife laws, no protection exists for the deteriorating vegetation of the area. As the nomination itself notes: "there must be some doubt as to whether the Jidda ecosystem can continue to survive in its present form under the current severe ecological impact of human exploitation and livestock damage". Further, "the integrity of the oryx habitat may be threatened in the future unless the perennial vegetation of the Jidda is managed to reduce the impact of livestock and to allow adequate regeneration".

Unfortunately, since the nomination was submitted, no progress has been made to provide statutory protection to the area and no government agency has yet been directed to enact or implement laws to protect the region's resources. The important woodlands of the southern Wadis of the Jidda are deteriorating rapidly through lack of regeneration and should be the target for urgent conservation management.

Another concern relates to the size of the population of the oryx herd which biologists have suggested needs to rise to at least 300 individuals before a viable population can be assured. The next 3-5 years will give an indication of the prospects for reaching this minimum size.

There are a number of other related issues such as the impact of oil exploration and the possibility of sand extraction from the area (for the manufacture of glass) and the use of part of the coastal area for military training purposes, but these are management issues that are subordinate to the general problem relating to the lack of legislative status and a management structure.

In conclusion, the site does not satisfy the condition of integrity (vi) of the Operational Guidelines which requires adequate long-term legislative, regulatory or institutional protection.

4. ADDITIONAL COMMENTS

The boundaries as presented are only approximate but do cover the current maximum range of the oryx plus a liberal buffer zone. Some of the obvious developed areas along the coast and the settlement of Al Ajaiz have been wisely excluded from the nomination. Further areas in the southwestern corner that have been excessively modified by oil production should also be excluded.

5. EVALUATION

The Jiddat is an important region in the context of Arabia as it combines a cold water, coastal area with an unusual Acacia-wooded desert landscape which merge into the southern dunes of the central Arabian sand-sea. All these exist in close proximity and are still functioning as a diverse and productive ecosystem. Also present are two important species - the reintroduced oryx and large numbers of gazelle. The site certainly has potential to meet natural criteria (iii) and (iv). It should also be clear that the oryx reintroduction here is part of a process to rehabilitate an entire desert ecosystem. The combination of the Jiddat, the oryx and the cooperation of the Harasis people have been successful to date to the benefit of all. The process, however, will require a long period of time.

Due to the lack of requisite protective legislation and that there is no administrative structure in place to manage the area, IUCN considers the nomination premature. Protection of vegetation is a major concern and this is directly related to the increase in oryx numbers to a level where viability can be assured. Additional work on fine-tuning boundaries to exclude oil exploration sites also needs to be done. Existing legislation and policy recommendations have been prepared in the 1986 report on **Proposals for a System of Nature Conservation Areas** (IUCN Report prepared for Sultanate of Oman) and follow-up on these is still awaited.

Finally, the mix of natural areas and human activities in the Jiddat suggest that it would be an ideal area in which to apply the biosphere reserve concept. The Bureau should suggest that such a designation be considered by the Omani authorities.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

A decision on this site should be deferred. The Government of Oman should be urged to enact legislation, implement a management regime for the area and define more precisely what the boundaries of a potential World Heritage site would be. The potential for Biosphere Reserve status for the area should also be suggested.