Dr. Saif Al-Ghais

Many people think the Arabian Peninsula is a desert environment lacking a diversity of wildlife, but they are wrong. The peninsula has a history and legacy of being farsighted in promoting the protection of terrestrial and marine environment ecosystems.

The Arabian Peninsula and its surrounding waters (the Arabian Gulf, the Arabian Sea, and the Red Sea) support a range of wildlife, including seabirds and migrant waders, sea turtles, sea cows (dugongs), coral reefs, and mangrove swamps, as well as commercial fisheries. However, terrestrial habitat degradation and undisciplined killing over the last forty years have caused the decline or eradication of over fifty species of rich and diverse land mammalian fauna, including the Arabian leopard, the Arabian gazelle, the wolf, the Arabian oryx, the Arabian tahr, and some species of less well-known carnivores such as the sand cat and the sand fox. The region contains complex and unique ecosystems and is internationally important for its bird life, located as it is in the west Asia/Euro-African migratory route for many species, including shorebirds and other waterfowl, and many birds of prey. The increasing pressure of urbanization leading to habitat degradation, combined with hunting of the bird population—especially desert hair, houbara, and falcon by traditional Arab falconry—and illegal trapping, have resulted in declining populations in the region. Terrestrial reptiles contribute significantly to the biological diversity of the Arabian Peninsula, being represented by a couple of dozen species, of which Acanthodactylus and Bunopus sp. are the most common lizards and Lytorhynchus and Eryx sp. the most common and most widespread snakes in the desert. These reptiles are morphologically and physiologically adapted to the harsh desert environment.

Knowledge of the invertebrates has been comparatively poor in the region. Some research studies have shown that the most common and widespread taxa occurring in the desert ecosystem and forming the greatest bio-mass are from the Arachnida and Insecta classes of arthropods, which are represented by more than 200 species of desert beetles, mites and ticks, true insects, scorpions, damselflies and dragonflies, grasshoppers and bush crickets. These invertebrates are important in the food chain of birds, reptiles, and mammals of the desert.
Throughout the region, there are more than two dozen wildlife reserves. These have been established in all the countries of the region (Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, and Yemen), in order to preserve biodiversity and protect wildlife (including marine turtles, dugongs, oryx, coral reefs, and mangrove swamps) and the avian population (including falcons, houbara and seabirds). Recent wildlife management initiatives include new forms of EPA related to environmental issues and tourism, as well as EIA and long-term monitoring programmes involving scientists and local communities. The main challenges to the wildlife of the Arabian Peninsula can be summarized in the fast development of most of the Gulf States, alien species invasions, overfishing, and oil pollution.

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