

# FRIENDS OF SOQOTRA

## Inaugural Meeting

25 August 2001, Royal Botanic Gardens Edinburgh

### Present:

Diccon Alexander, London, England  
Michael Apel, Senckenberg, Germany  
Ruth Atkinson, Edinburgh, Scotland  
Heidi Cant, Ghent, Belgium  
Sue Christie, Lisburn, Northern  
Ireland  
Peter De Geest, Ghent, Belgium  
John Dickson, Bristol, England  
Roderic Dutton, Durham, England  
Dave Edwards, East Yorkshire,  
England  
Jean Gorham, Essex, England  
Sandra Grant, Glasgow, Scotland  
Phil Haines, London, England  
Dylan Hannon, Los Angeles,  
California, USA  
Ulrich Joger, Darmstadt, Germany  
Rebecca Klaus, Bangor, Wales

Tony Miller, Edinburgh, Scotland  
Tony Milroy, Yorkshire, England  
Jacopo Monzini, Florence, Italy  
Miranda Morris, St Andrews, Scotland  
Margaret Munro, Edinburgh, Scotland  
Neil Oakman, Hertfordshire, England  
Roz Park, Essex, England  
Serena Petroncini, Italy  
David Porter, Coventry, England  
Wolfgang Schneider, Darmstadt,  
Germany  
Steve Scott, Edinburgh, Scotland  
Morag Smith, Dunoon, Scotland  
Sandy Smith, Dunoon, Scotland  
Francine Stone, Oxon, England  
Kay van Damme, Ghent, Belgium  
Nick Wilding, Yorkshire, England  
Wolfgang Wranik, Rostock, Germany

## 1. Introduction

**1.1.** Tony Miller welcomed the delegates to the Royal Botanic Gardens Edinburgh for this inaugural event. The 32 delegates represented eight countries and a huge range of interests, but all shared a concern for Soqotra, its people and its environment.

**1.2.** Sue Christie provided a short summary of how a group of botanical tourists to the island in January 2001 felt that they wished to do something for the island and its people. Following extensive consultation with many of those in the room and others with a concern for the archipelago the idea of Friends of Soqotra was born. The basic idea is to bring people with an interest in the island together to discuss ideas, share knowledge and devise projects. The idea is not new; it was recommended in the Symposium volume from 1996. Neil Oakman, Sue and Dylan Hannon had worked to organise this meeting, but it was now up to the people in the room to determine what the role and activities of the Friends of Soqotra should be.

## 2. Setting the Scene

### 2.1. In Balfour's Footsteps

**Tony Miller** provided a brief review of the work that he and his group have conducted on the archipelago since 1989. They have made more than 15 trips in the past 12 years and have compiled a survey of the islands, including a baseline vegetation survey, identification of special scientific interest and photographic panoramas. They have identified six Biodiversity Reserves which form the basis of the zoning plans approved by the Yemeni Government. They have mapped the distribution of species and applied the IUCN categories to the endemics, the numbers of which are increasing with every visit to the islands.

However, there have been many changes in the past ten years; the mangroves are gone, there is drying of much of the land and many changes in the vegetation. Although the traditional view is that this is due to goats, evidence suggests that (although the goats do not help the situation) the main problem is decreasing mists in the Haghier Mountains over the past 100 years.

Questions elicited the following points:

- ◆ Getting the locals involved is the key to conservation on the island. Unusually, nothing is required to be 'done' - current land management mechanisms need to be strengthened and reinforced.
- ◆ The drying cycle appears to be well outside the 'acknowledged' 20 year cycle; this has been happening for 100 or more years. Many plants are just at the tips of their ranges and any change in climate is having a major impact on these species, many of which are endemic.

## **2.2. The Soqotran Community**

**Miranda Morris** is a linguist and ethnographer who has visited the island more, spent more time there, and spoken to many more Soqotris than anyone else. She began by pointing out that most of us have only experienced the very wealthy and vegetationally lush areas, as the roads tend to follow the wadis. The high plateau is very different - much drier and a far more difficult place in which to live. There are few plants of commercial value, no cash crops will grow there and the people depend on sheep, often surviving with no water to drink. Aloe does grow in some of these areas and is potentially exploitable.

In 1999 there was a severe famine on the island, many animals and people died. Life, already difficult, became even harder and many people from the highlands moved to the lowlands. This has increased demand for houses, fodder, food and water, and resulted in disease and parasites of livestock when they do not migrate. As a result of the famine there is a flush of grass at present, but animals are becoming more wild; there are even feral cows.

## **2.3. A Faunistic Overview**

**Wolfgang Wranik** was lucky to be able to visit the island in the early 1980s and has been involved in surveying the animals since that time. Livestock are the primary mammals, with three bats probably being the only 'native' mammals, but increasing populations of rats, mice and feral cats. There is a wide variety of birds; of 175 species there are 41 breeding species of which at least six are endemic. There is a great variety of reptiles, but so far no amphibians have been found. Fish require further study, but may be restricted to introductions and marine species secondarily entering freshwater. Invertebrate life is very rich and varied, and more species are being identified on each visit.

There is a great need for education, and he has recently produced a series of posters on the fauna. A guidebook is also required, and he and Miranda are working on producing this, including local names of animals and the stories behind them.

# **3. Aims, Role and Activities**

**3.1.** The political situation in Yemen is changing with the new Island's Authority, a new Minister for the Environment and the Islands and the new EPA replacing the EPC on Soqatra. The Soqatra Conservation Fund, a recommendation of the GEF programme, is backed by the UN and will be administered in Yemen. It is not yet fully operational, but could become very important. FOS should liaise closely with the SCF, Yemen Government and Yemen academics. It is vital that the Aims are agreed by these people and organisations and that they are translated suitably, understandably and sensitively into Arabic at the

earliest opportunity. Dr Abdul Rahman Al Eriyani has sent a message of good will to FOS, and he should be asked for a nominee for a representative on the Executive Committee.

**Action: Contact Dr Al Eriyani requesting a nominee for the Executive and for assistance in translating the Constitution.**

**3.2.** A detailed discussion ensued re the Aims/Objects of FOS. A number of suggestions were made and it was agreed that the Executive Committee should develop these into a revised Objects which would be circulated to all Members for comment.

**Action: Executive to redraft and circulate for comment.**

**3.3.** The unique aspect of FOS - and one which some felt it would be difficult to achieve - is that it is committed to balancing scientific investigation with bringing direct benefits to the Soqotri people. All agreed that this is perhaps difficult, but must be the principle aim of FOS, and a characteristic of all work it does. This could be accomplished either by each project having both scientific and practical aspects or by linking separate projects. It must be seen by the Soqotrans that FOS has direct benefits for themselves. The benefits of scientific expertise should be utilised to conduct research with direct practical benefits. Training of local people is an essential aspect of this work. The scientific expertise of the members of FOS a great asset, and provides a complementary resource to development organisations which have practical experience but may lack the research expertise to devise the optimal project or implementation mechanism. The pool of expertise in FOS should be used to deliver the needs of the Soqotris. FOS requires a 'branch' in Soqotra who will determine what is needed; FOS can then provide the expertise to answer the questions identified as important by the Soqotris. FOS projects must contribute to direct improvements in quality of life for Soqotris. Small scale projects are most desirable.

**Action: To be incorporated into the Aims/Objects and a Code of Conduct devised by the Executive to deliver on these ambitions.**

**3.4.** The spelling of Soqotra was debated. It was proposed that the q form required u's whereas use of the c allowed use of o's; therefore Soqotra was not correct. This was debated, with no apparent agreement. The group voted on the spelling, with the c form obtaining 9 votes and q 17.

**Action: Use the spelling Soqotra.**

**3.5.** The draft Constitution was gone through in detail with discussion on various clauses, including numbers of Executive Committee Members (decided as 11), quorum at meetings and numbers of meetings. Following full discussion it was AGREED UNANIMOUSLY that the Constitution should be adopted with the agreed modifications and subject to the Executive Committee revising the Aims/Objects as discussed.

**Action: Unanimously AGREED that:**

- ◆ **the Constitution be ADOPTED subject to agreed modifications;**
- ◆ **the Constitution be submitted to UK Charities Commission for recognition as a charity;**
- ◆ **a Bank Account be set up at the Treasurer's address in the name of Friends of Soqotra.**

**3.6.** The Membership Fees for FOS were discussed and an annual fee of £20 was agreed, with a 'bulk discount' to be available for subscriptions for five years. A fee of £100 per annum was agreed for Corporations/Organisations. It was agreed that Yemeni Members should pay the equivalent of \$2, paid locally. In some ways all residents of Soqotra are 'members' - in that they are beneficiaries of FOS activities. However, some individuals or groups may wish to be formal Members.

**Action: Membership Fees as above to be levied of Members, with Yemeni fees to be delayed until suitable structures are in place for collection.**

#### 4. Appointment of Officers and Executive Committee

The following persons were nominated for the respective Offices and unanimously elected:

<b>Chairman:</b>	Miranda Morris
<b>Vice Chairman:</b>	Wolfgang Wranik
<b>Secretary:</b>	Sue Christie
<b>Treasurer:</b>	Neil Oakman

The following were nominated for the Executive Committee and unanimously elected:

- ◆ Peter De Geest
- ◆ John Dickson
- ◆ Rebecca Klaus
- ◆ Tony Miller
- ◆ Tony Milroy
- ◆ Sandy Smith

#### 5. Discussion of Potential Activities

Much of the philosophical basis of this had been discussed during the Objects Discussion. The following points were raised and agreed for action:

**Action:**

- ◆ **Questionnaire to be circulated for all to supply information on expertise, interests, etc. and what they want from FOS; Compile Directory of Expertise - Sue Christie.**
- ◆ **Discussion by Executive of how FOS projects relate to Soqotra Master Plan priorities - Executive.**
- ◆ **Contact British-Yemeni Association to determine best way to inform Yemeni embassy - Francine Stone.**
- ◆ **Ensure full openness of all information; publicise to a larger audience in Yemen and elsewhere; through journals, etc. - All.**
- ◆ **Prepare leaflet summarising Aims, etc. - Sue Christie.**
- ◆ **Present FOS to Island's Authority and ask Dr Al Eriyani to take to the Ministry of Planning for registry as an NGO - Exec, Tony Milroy.**
- ◆ **Request a British-Yemeni Studies Travel Grant to bring Dr Al Eriyani to next FOS meeting.**

Further discussion was deferred until a future meeting due to the lateness of the hour.

#### 6. Reports of Recent Research Work

- ◆ **Peter De Geest** provided a summary of the work carried out by the Soqotra Karst Project in January 2001 and presented their proposals for work in 2002.
- ◆ **Michael Apel** summarised his work on Soqotran marine and freshwater zoology.
- ◆ **Serena Petroncini** discussed her findings of a comparative study of populations of *Dracaena cinnebari*.

Presentations were curtailed due to limited time. Full reports will be presented at future meetings where there will be more time scheduled for discussion.

#### 7. Date and Form of Next Meeting

It was proposed and agreed that the next meeting would be a conference, looking in greater detail at current research and at future projects and activities. It is hoped that this Conference will take place in the spring (April-May) of 2002 in Darmstadt.

**Action: Executive Committee to plan Conference.**