



Fig. 1: Soqotra – general view of the high plateaus, with the dragon blood trees (all photos except 2 and 3: Kay van Damme)

Friends of Soqotra – Report and projects (2017-2018)

Lisa Banfield, Miranda Morris, Dana Pietsch and Kay van Damme

Friends of Soqotra Conference 2017 in Bern

The 16th Conference and Annual General Meeting of the *Friends of Soqotra* (FoS) was hosted by the Natural History Museum in Bern, Switzerland, with Dr Eike Neubert as the main organizer, on 27-29 October 2017. Around 25 people attended (Fig. 2), including guests from Yemen (Soqatra and the mainland), Bahrain, UK, Czech Republic, Italy, South Africa, Russia, Germany and Belgium. The conference started on Saturday, 28 October, with a welcome address by Prof. Dr Christian Kropf and Dr Eike Neubert on behalf of the hosting institute, followed by an introduction by the Deputy Governor for Environment and Development Affairs of Soqatra, Muhammad ‘Abd al-Jamil ‘Abd Allah ‘Ali, who is currently conducting his PhD research at the University of Kent (UK) on sustainable tourism on Soqatra. The Deputy Governor expressed his sincere thanks for the ongoing efforts of the FoS and praised it as an organisation that has been continuing yearly events as well as small-scale projects on the island over many years, despite ongoing difficult times in Yemen. He noted that these efforts are well received and emphasized

the importance of continuous efforts by the international community in local education, awareness, sustainable development and conservation of the natural and cultural heritage on Soqatra. The opening of the meeting was followed by presentations on the ongoing projects and research on the Archipelago.

Dr Julian Jansen van Rensburg of the Freie Universität Berlin introduced the start of a 30-month British Council project that aims to integrate Soqatra’s cultural heritage with conservation, aiming at both tangible (archaeology) and intangible (e.g. language) culture. The project is led by the Royal Botanical Gardens of Edinburgh (UK) and will focus on both the training in and further protection of cultural heritage, including efforts towards promoting the Soqotri language through poetry competitions. The project also has a sustainable cultural tourism component, which was presented during the meeting. The introduction of the heritage focus of the project was followed by Vladimir Melnik presenting a review of the many yet unrecorded archaeological sites on Soqatra, which will also be integrated into the project. Dr Petr Vahalik and Dr Martin Rezek from Mendel University in Brno, Czech Republic,

presented the latest research on Soqotra with regards to mapping for conservation, and the importance of *Dracaena cinnabari*, the iconic dragon blood tree of Soqotra, as an important nursery plant which stimulates other species to sprout under the protection of its canopy and fallen leaves. This was followed by a presentation on biology by Dr Uli Joger of the Staatliches Naturhistorisches Museum in Braunschweig, Germany, on the origin of Soqotra animals and their links to mainland faunas.

The afternoon included an update by Dr Kay Van Damme on the ongoing UNEP/GEF project on Soqotra (GEF ID #5347) implemented by EPA Socotra, the Ministry of Water and Environment Yemen, and the Senckenberg Research Institute, Frankfurt, Germany. This project aims to integrate conservation and sustainable development on the Archipelago, and to present its online data repository in a form available to all (The Soqotra Conservation and Development Portal). The main components of the project consist of reducing threats of invasive species, land degradation and unsustainable land management while stimulating sustainable funding, capacity building, biodiversity conservation and protected areas management. The UNEP/GEF project funded participation of several attendants at the meeting (e.g. all attendants from Yemen and Czech Republic).

The presentation was followed by the Deputy Governor of Soqotra introducing his PhD study on the impacts of community-based ecotourism on attitudes towards conservation on the island. The conference programme concluded with two important sessions on conservation: one by Dr Eike Neubert on the status and the importance of IUCN Red Listing on Soqotra, and the second by Dr Haifaa Abdulhalim from the Arab Regional Centre for World Heritage in Bahrain on the Tabe'a Programme on Soqotra. FoS and ARC-WH worked together this year to realise small-scale projects related to mitigating climate change impacts caused by the 2015 cyclone. These projects are initiated by Ismael Salem, who is one of the FoS representatives on the island. Dr Haifaa Abdulhalim and Ismael Salem (via Skype from Bahrain) presented one of these joint projects: the realisation of a vegetation regeneration plot in Momi Plateau on Soqotra, and other projects such as reparations due to damages caused by *khareefs* [strong monsoon winds]. The day concluded with a two-hour roundtable discussion with the audience focused on Soqotra's cultural and natural heritage, present and future, and on sustainable development

on the Archipelago. The discussion emphasized the needs and importance of the local communities on Soqotra, also voiced by the Deputy Governor, and discussed the current threats to culture and nature.

Sunday consisted of the Annual General Meeting and the selection of projects to be carried out by FoS in the coming year. The selected projects include distribution of information and awareness leaflets on plants, animals and culture; assistance to a disabled children project by training of Soqotri teachers; working with a British Council project on cultural heritage and with the UNEP/GEF project; and commitment to a formal agreement with ARC-WH to realise a joint mangrove restoration project on the northern coast. ARC-WH kindly proposed to host the next FoS meeting in 2018 at their centre in Bahrain, which was unanimously agreed on. This will be the first meeting of the FoS in the Middle East, an initiative that was well received.

The meeting in 2017 emphasized the ongoing role of FoS as an organisation in catalyzing discussions and ideas in a multidisciplinary international setting and in allowing an update of ongoing projects (two are described in the following) and research on Soqotra with links directly to people on the ground.

Project: Friends of Soqotra Factsheets – A Valuable Resource for Soqotri Tour Guides

In response to a request from a Soqotri tour guide, the FoS committee and colleagues have developed a series of information factsheets aimed at visitors to the islands (Fig 3.). The aim of the factsheets is to provide information on local norms and customs to avoid impolite or potentially offensive behaviour, and to enhance the visitors' experience by pointing out interesting and unique facts about the islands. These publications will therefore help to avoid uncomfortable situations, allow the tour guides to deliver a more valuable service and promote environmentally sensitive behaviour in tourists. Subjects covered include an introduction to the Soqotra Archipelago and the FoS, general information and guidelines for tourists, the Soqotri language and the traditional way of life. Also, there are separate factsheets highlighting special birds, reptiles, trees and small plants. Additional factsheets will be added in the future.

The first set of factsheets has been taken to Soqotra by an FoS committee member to gather feedback from tourism

Fig. 2: Participants of the meeting in Bern (photo: FOS)





بعض من طيور سقطري الخاصة (1)

لقد تم تسجيل أكثر من 220 نوعا من الطيور في جزيرة سقطري، تشمل 11 نوعا توجد في أي مكان آخر في العالم. 5 منها مهددة عالميا باقراض، بما فيها طائر العقاب المصري واسع انتشار. هذه المطوية تبين بعضا من هذه الطيور الخاصة والمألوفة. استمتع بزيارتك



لعوسق

Falco tinnunculus

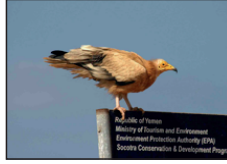
(المسافة بين الجناحين 75 سم)
أصغر الطيور الجارحة في جزيرة سقطري. يتغذى على الحشرات والسحالي



الصقر السقطري

Buteo socotraensis

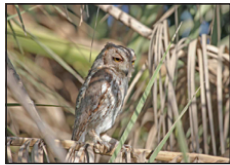
(المسافة بين الجناحين 110 سم)
يوجد في الجبال ويبنى أعش على المنحدرات الصخرية. يحلق عاليا دون عناء



العقاب المصري

Neophron percnopterus

(المسافة بين الجناحين 150 سم)
يمكن ترويضه. مهدد عاليا باقراض لكنه واسع انتشار في سقطري.



البومة إفريقية أو الهندية

Otus socotranus

(المسافة بين الجناحين 21 سم)
استمع لصوتها في الليل: ووب ووب دا-ووبوب. المكان الوحيد في العالم الذي توجد فيه هو سقطري



حمامة النخيل (اليمامة الضاحكة)

Spilopelia senegalensis

(المسافة بين الجناحين 25 سم)
واسعة انتشار وتوجد بكثرة حيثما توجد أشجار النخيل



النورس الفاحم

Larus hemprichii

(المسافة بين الجناحين 45 سم)
ينتشر على طول الساحل مع طيور النوارس الأخرى. يتبع قوارب الصيد غالبا



الهارجة السقطرية

Cisticola haesitata

(المسافة بين الجناحين 12 سم)
صغيرة الحجم، تشدو بأغنية الطيران فوق الشجيرات على الكثبان الساحلية. توجد في أي مكان آخر في العالم سوى سقطري



القنبرة السوداء المتوجة

Eremopterix nigriceps

(المسافة بين الجناحين 12 سم)
يمكن رؤيتها في أسراب كبيرة في المناطق الرملية؛ قريبا من الطرق في الغالب



سمامة برليوزي

Apus berliozii

(المسافة بين الجناحين 17 سم)
طائر السمامة الوحيد الذي من المرجح رؤيته - غالبا في أسراب كبيرة، على الرغم من أنه غير شائع يبنى أعش في الكهوف

www.friendsofsocotra.org
Printed 2017

Fig. 3: Touristic leaflet (photo: FOS)

officials and tour guides. The intention is to print durable sets in English and Arabic for tour guides to keep in their vehicles. FoS committee members have also translated some factsheets into additional languages such as Dutch, German and Russian. All factsheets will be freely available for download from the FoS website.

Project: Children with Special Needs on Soqatra

Judith Arcus has recently (autumn 2017) returned to Soqatra to start working at the English Institute in the capital Hadibo. She is a trained kindergarten teacher who is also qualified to teach children with special needs. The Institute hopes to eventually open a general kindergarten into which children with special needs will be integrated when possible, as well as having a special classroom for teaching those who are much older or unable to integrate. For the moment Judith has 13 children with special needs [two with Down's Syndrome, two with autism, two with

learning disability, two with very weak muscle tone and unable to walk, and five deaf children], as well as a few children who have no disability but who come to help and act as role models for the other children. Mothers (or other women of the family) are usually asked to attend classes with the children: Many of these children have never attended school and are not used to being away from their families, and the majority only speak Soqotri. Therefore, female relatives can help interpret for the children, while learning new skills themselves, as well as how to help their children more effectively at home.

The most pressing need is to train two Soqotran women to work with Judith: one to work especially with the deaf children and one to work with the other children with special needs. FoS has agreed to fund the on-the-job training of two women for one year. In addition, Judith has become aware of other children with special needs on the island, some who live too far away to be able to come to the Institute. There is clearly a pressing need to carry out an island-wide survey to establish the level of need for such special schooling on the island. Funds will be required both for such a survey and to expand the reach of this valuable work.

The Current Situation on Soqatra

Although there is currently no armed conflict on the island, life on Soqatra is inevitably linked to events on the mainland. Since the start of the war, regular means of transport to and from the island have been reduced, which has resulted in Soqatra's increased isolation from the outside world. This isolation has had a direct effect on regular import and export, but also on the normal travel of the Soqotri from and to the island, and on access for international visitors. Due to the reduction of flights to Soqatra and the difficulties for visitors to currently travel through the mainland, the regular forms of tourism on Soqatra have almost come to a complete halt. Ecotourism, while acknowledging its potential threat to cultural

and natural heritage in the absence of regulation, provided an important yearly income for local communities. At present, all international flights, including for tourism, are organised by the Emirates.

Soqatra faces ongoing problems of poverty, disease, water shortage in many areas, unsustainable land and sea use, weak protection of cultural and natural heritage, uncontrolled imports of species with huge risks to island life, and a rapid waning of ancient traditions. As a result of the situation on the mainland, it has become much harder for the Soqotri to hold on to their land, as stretches are being bought up by foreign investors from the Emirates. Inland, as the access and imports of goods (such as gas) has decreased, the consumption of local resources, such as wood, has increased, resulting in a direct reduction of vegetation and therefore land degradation. Illegal practices such as the export of coral stone and illegal commercial fishing, which have been going on for years, are continuing

around the coasts and in the sea. Both the natural and cultural heritage, which are needed to ensure the long-term identity of the Soqotri for future generations, are at stake. Irreparable destruction of cultural or natural heritage may occur unexpectedly, and quickly. For example, in April 2017, FoS supported the Soqotran governorate in its efforts to stop the direct destruction of a cultural heritage site, via a letter calling for an immediate halt to the bulldozing of the ancient Hill Fort of Jebel Hawari on the north coast. Due to a rapid response (within one day) of the governor, the deputy governors and EPA, backed up by the international community with the letter expressing concern, the bulldozers were stopped and the destruction halted. The voice of the Soqotri in protecting their environment is an important requirement, even more so when raised to the international community. Even for Yemen as a whole, Soqotra is a unique asset, with its own singular culture and fragile ecosystems. FoS issued a statement in its last newsletter (Tayf, July 2017), emphasizing its aims and viewpoint:

“What we have all been reading about Soqotra in the news and on social media over the last few months is confusing, often contradictory and sometimes disturbing. The *Friends of Soqotra* was established with two principal aims: supporting the islanders in their conservation of the rich marine and terrestrial biodiversity on which they will ultimately depend for their long-term survival, and lending any support we can to their efforts to sustain and develop their equally unique cultural heritage. The constitution of the *Friends of Soqotra* focuses on these areas of concern, and takes no political

position. However, we hope that the ability of Soqotrans to sustain themselves in the years to come, for example through fishing, stock breeding or ecotourism, is being adequately protected in all current projects or activities. It is the wish of us all that the Soqotrans will be able to discuss and peacefully determine their future and that of their islands with minimal interference or pressure from any outside agency.”

The above captures the essence of the hope of FoS: The Soqotri will be able to sustain themselves and their cultural and natural heritage will be safeguarded. This hope is supported by the ongoing efforts of the international community, which has not abandoned the efforts in Soqotra’s capacity building despite the situation on the mainland. A few major projects such as the UNEP/GEF project and the British Council Project, as well as the ongoing efforts by the FoS, ARC-WH and several NGOs on a smaller scale, all continue to emphasize the importance of the Soqotri’s ability to take pride in their heritage and for the ecosystems to sustainably support the coming generations. The presence of the Soqotran Deputy Governor for Environment and Development Affairs at the meeting shows the support and ongoing interest of the Soqotran government for the efforts of the FoS in carrying out its constitution.

We hope that at some point in the near future, regular flights to the island may resume. But even more importantly, we hope that the Soqotri will have the capacity to secure their future and that of their children in the land and the language of their ancestors.

The authors are all committee members of the Friends of Soqotra: www.friendsofsoqotra.org

British Council Soqotra Project: <https://www.britishcouncil.org/arts/culture-development/cultural-protection-fund/projects/Intergrating-Socotra-heritage>

UNEP/GEF Project Soqotra Project: <https://www.thegef.org/project/support-integrated-program-conservation-and-sustainable-development-socotra-archipelago>



Fig. 5. The Regeneration Plot, jointly set up by ARC-WH and FoS in Momi, Soqotra, to counter loss of vegetation during the cyclones of 2015, is one of the local small-scale projects initiated by FoS in 2016, which also serve to increase awareness and decrease environmental impacts.

Fig. 7. Increased wood collection on the island in times of decreased import of cooking gas (e.g., during monsoons, and decrease during the war); destruction of habitats and unsustainable resource use are increasing; several projects try to counter these impacts

Fig. 6. One example of a “Soqotra flag” on a stone – today a common sight on the island. The flags illustrate how the islanders are increasingly forced to choose sides locally while Yemen is being torn apart.

