

INTERVIEW WITH HIS EXCELLENCY SHEIKH BUTTI BIN MAKTOUM BIN JUMA AL MAKTOUM

Interviewed by Tom Bailey and Declan O'Donovan from WME News

The zoological and conservation fields have a long tradition of being supported by royalty.; HRH Prince Phillip, Duke of Edinburgh, was President of the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) from 1981-1996, while in the UAE HH Sheikh Zayed al Nahyan, the former President of the UAE founded many programs to protect the country's wildlife.

In this article WME News editors have interviewed Sh Butti Bin Maktoum Bin Juma Al Maktoum who is known for his passion for the wildlife of the Arabian Peninsula and beyond.

As a boy growing up in Dubai what animals did your family keep?

My father was a falconer, so falcons were part of my childhood, as were salukis which along with the falcons were used for hunting. Traditionally the falcon and saluki were important animals for the Bedouin family, particularly during the winter when we went hunting houbara and hares in the desert.

What are your earliest memories of wildlife?

One of my earliest memories of wildlife is when my father brought me a baby hare to look after when I was about 5 years old. My father also brought back young hedgehogs and gazelles for us to rear. We lived in Jumeirah and there was one mountain gazelle I remember in particular that had been hand-reared and would follow us around the garden!

What are your earliest memories of the desert?

In the late 1960's I remember hunting with my father in the desert south of Jebel Ali. What I remember most is the fact that other than our vehicles there were no other car tracks in the desert. It was pristine. I remember more vegetation in the 1960's, indeed we used to call the ghaf areas of Wadi Al Safa and Al Awir 'forests'. I think the rainfall patterns have changed since that time.

Again, I remember there were often heavy rains in October and November which meant we would collect many truffles from the desert the following February. I feel there is less rain falling in the desert areas of the UAE and this is having a bad effect on the vegetation.

People living in Dubai and the Middle East in 2010 probably consider that the desert is a very impoverished environment for wildlife, but when you were growing up what wildlife could you expect to see in the desert?

In the late 1950's and early 1960's we used to see many hares, houbara and karowan (*Burhinus*

oedicnemus) in the desert. We used to see small numbers of mountain gazelle and I remember my saluki catching a rheem gazelle which were very seldom seen near Jebel Ali.

Wolves were not uncommon and I remember my father returning with 2 that he had shot once. Obviously one thing that has changed for the better with modernisation is the increase in wildlife, mainly birds, in our towns and cities because of the irrigated gardens and parks.

Are traditional values that were important for the relationship of the Bedouin with the desert environment changing?

Our people, by this I mean the next generation, are losing many of their traditional skills that helped us survive as a people in the desert. The old Bedouin knew so much about the desert, about tracking animals and navigation. I remember being lost in the desert at night and being navigated out by an old Bedouin who took us safely out using only his knowledge of the vegetation and the wind direction pattern of the dunes. I feel sad that these traditional skills are being lost.

Has your passion for animals affected your own children's outlook on wildlife?

Just as my father brought me animals to look after when I was growing up, so I have taken young orphaned animals to my daughter Mariam, to nurture. Now my daughter also has a passion and interest in wildlife.

What do you think are the biggest environmental problems in the Middle East and what can the Arab nations do to deal with them?

Pollution is one of the big environmental issues, we have a lot of air pollution from cars and trucks and our factories are not being monitored effectively enough for the waste they discharge into the environment. Water consumption in the region is worrying.

What are the biggest threats to the wildlife in the Middle East and what can the Arab nations do to deal with them?

Lack of education on the environment and wildlife is the biggest threat facing wildlife. Our people need to be more aware of the problems and threats that wildlife and the environment faces.

Fig 1 Sh Butti examining an oryx at his desert reserve.

