

ARABIAN BUSTARD CONSERVATION IN YEMEN: PUBLIC AWARENESS PERSPECTIVE

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Introduction

The Arabian bustard, *Ardeotis arabs*, is an endangered bird species in Yemen where it is confined to scattered pockets in Tehama, in the West of the country, where traditional cereal fields represent an ideal habitat for the species (Figure 1). Poaching, illegal egg collection and large-scale commercial farming are key threats contributing to the marked decline of the Arabian bustard. Since 2002 the National Avian Research Centre (NARC), a research center of the International Fund for Houbara Conservation (IFHC), has been conducting field expeditions to Tehama plains to study the species ecology (Judas et al. 2006). One conclusion of these field studies was that local people are unaware of the unsustainable practices which significantly affect the long-term survival of the species. In response, a conservation education campaign was developed with a straightforward goal to address the problems facing the Arabian bustard, locally called *Louwa*. Security officers and school students were identified to be the primary target group for the campaign. This article describes the campaign and outlines future directions of public awareness campaigns dealing with Arabian bustard in Yemen.

Illegal trade issues

Although Yemen is a member party of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES), several instances of illegal trade in wild birds have been recorded (e.g. Stanton 2010). During the last decade the Arabian bustard population has been heavily poached. The most common capture method uses locally designed traps placed in cereal fields where the bustards are commonly found. Once caught, the birds are transported and sold outside the country for private collections and falcon-training purposes. The increasing levels of poverty in rural areas of Tehama and the high market value of the Arabian bustard are all catalysts for the trade.

In an attempt to curtail this trade, the education and involvement of security officers was considered to be an urgent anti-poaching measure. NARC, in collaboration with the Environment Protection Authority (EPA) of Yemen, organised an environmental workshop in February 2009 which was attended by security officers throughout Tehama. The goal of the workshop was to introduce the Arabian bustard conservation programme to security officers and other senior government officials in Tehama. Several presentations were given covering a wide range of conservation issues. The workshop concluded by stressing the importance of implementing necessary measures against ongoing poaching of the Arabian bustard population in Yemen.



Figure 1. A displaying male of Arabian bustard in Tehama, Yemen (IFHC)



Figure 2. Students attending a presentation about Arabian bustard (IFHC)

School campaign

Tehama has a good network of public schools with a large number of children from farming backgrounds. These were targeted by the Arabian bustard public awareness campaign. Many schools were poorly equipped, often without electricity or large enough class rooms. These logistical obstacles were overcome with a portable generator and a sub-selection of students from each class chosen to attend. The presentation covered issues relating to the Arabian bustard conservation. Many students were familiar with the species having encountered it on their farms; however, most were unaware of its declining status. Questions related to the Arabian bustard were posed at completion of the presentation and students answering correctly were rewarded with Arabian bustard T-shirts, hats, and pencils. The campaign visited 9 schools and was attended by 532 students. This represents 13% of the students in the public schools of this important Arabian bustard habitat.

Future directions

- Strengthen the relationship with security departments in Tehama and provide them with periodic updates about the status of the Arabian bustard as indicated by annual population surveys.
- Educate local farmers on the importance of the Arabian bustard conservation program. This is most likely to be effective if the conservation/ education program is based on marketing the Arabian bustard amongst villagers as a flagship species for bird conservation in Tehama.
- Secure sufficient financial resources to implement future public awareness campaigns.
- Periodically evaluate the impact of the public awareness campaign on perception and behaviour of target groups and adapt the activities of the campaign accordingly.

Acknowledgements and references are available on the more detailed web version of this article.