

THE ANIMAL ENCOUNTER: A SUCCESS STORY TOWARDS CONSERVING BIODIVERSITY IN LEBANON

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INTRODUCTION

Lebanon is a small Middle Eastern country situated on the eastern shores of the Mediterranean Sea. Its bio-climatic regimes and elevation ranges (0 - 3080m asl) make Lebanon unique in the Mediterranean region, and endow it with a very rich biodiversity, both in terms of its flora and fauna. More than 4,633 species of plants have been recorded. Of these species, 92 are endemic to Lebanon, while 236 are wild and cultivated medicinal plant species. More than 460 species of fauna consisting of amphibians, reptiles, birds and mammals have been cited, however, none of these are endemic to Lebanon. Most of these species, flora and fauna, are threatened due to over-grazing, over-harvesting, over-exploitation, intensive agriculture, excessive use of pesticides, drying of swamps and through direct persecution, hunting, poisoning, introduction of alien species, deforestation, uncontrolled urban development, and habitat destruction (draining of swamps).

In response to these threats, several institutions have a direct or indirect role in dealing with environmental and biodiversity issues in Lebanon. Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have played an important role in conservation and environmental protection, both at national and local levels, and have collaborated with the Ministry of Environment, the Ministry of Agriculture, and the Ministry of Culture and Higher Education, to protect the remaining biodiversity. A total of 45 nature reserves (NR) have been established at national and local levels under different categories of protection. However, these NRs were too small to conserve fauna species that require large home range thereby exposing them to increased risk of being killed as soon as they leave the safety of the reserve. Accordingly, the need to establish an educational and awareness centre to promote the role and the importance of biodiversity conservation is crucial if this biodiversity is to persist for several generations to come.

THE ANIMAL ENCOUNTER

The Animal Encounter, an educational centre for wildlife conservation in Lebanon was established in 1993 as the first awareness centre in Lebanon playing a key role in wildlife conservation. Animal Encounter is located in Aley – Mount Lebanon and lies 23 km from the capital Beirut. The major aim of Animal Encounter is to promote public awareness towards wildlife conservation among the Lebanese public in general, and among students in particular. Besides raising awareness, Animal Encounter also treats, cures and nurtures injured, orphaned, or abandoned wild animals brought by concerned citizens and returns them to the wild if their situation permits. Otherwise, rescued animals remain at Animal Encounter, where they serve as ambassadors for species conservation. Animal Encounter remains the only centre of its kind in Lebanon.

Promoting public awareness at Animal Encounter targets all age groups and is achieved through seminars, guided tours, information boards, and animal encounters. Two outreach programmes are conducted at the centre as follows:

1. Student programme: Students will visit the Animal Encounter as part of their school curriculum, and are offered different kinds of activities to meet their needs, depending on their educational level and age. This programme included various seminars, aided by audio-visual displays on different animal and plant species, their role in the environment, the threats facing them in the wild, and ways to conserve them in situ.

2. Public programme: Public visiting the Animal Encounter as part of a family weekend outing, tour the exhibits accompanied by a guide who gives information on the animals exhibited. Such information includes: their distribution, abundance, role in the environment, the threats they are facing in the wild, and the ways to conserve them in situ.

RESIDENTS OF THE ANIMAL ENCOUNTER

Receiving exotic (non-native) animals is not accepted at Animal Encounter mainly to prevent trade with these animals and discourage people from getting these animals and abandoning them later on. All species inhabiting the centre are native Lebanese wildlife and are not suitable for release. These include birds such as long legged buzzard (*Buteo rufinus*), white storks (*Ciconia ciconia*), white pelican (*Pelecanus onocrotalus*), griffon vulture (*Gyps fulvus*), barn owl (*Tyto alba*) and mammals such as red foxes (*Vulpes vulpes palestina*), jungle cat (*Felis chaus*), wild cats (*Felis silvestris*), badgers (*Meles*



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Fig 1. Students attending a lecture

meles), striped hyaena (*Hyaena hyaena syriaca*), grey wolves (*Canis lupus pallipus*), common jackals (*Canis aureus*), wild boar (*Sus scrofa libatica*), brown bear (*Ursus arctos*), porcupine (*Hystrix indica indica*), fallow deer (*Dama dama*), together with domestic animals to enable students to differentiate between wild and domestic. Moreover, thirty species of native forest trees are also present at the centre

ACHIEVEMENTS OF THE ANIMAL ENCOUNTER

The centre is visited by more than 35,000 visitors a year. More than 20,000 of these are students. A study conducted in 2005 on the effectiveness of the Animal Encounter in changing the attitudes of visitors towards wildlife showed that 85% of visitors had negative attitudes towards wildlife and only 37% supported their conservation before visiting the centre. However, after attending the Animal Encounter outreach programmes, more than 85% of the visitors changed their attitudes towards wildlife and support conservation. In addition, Animal Encounter became a resource centre for more than 100 students conducting their research on biodiversity by using the facilities of the centre. The programmes offered also target the rangers of the Ministry of Agriculture and the rangers of the Nature Reserves. Furthermore, the Animal Encounter played a major role in introducing wildlife conservation topics to the media. Local newspapers cover most of the activities and news occurring at the centre, as well as numerous TV spots which were produced by different TV stations in Lebanon tackling awareness issues of different native animals in Lebanon. Moreover, the centre has become a reference facility for people who contact us or bring injured, trapped, and orphaned animals to the centre. On a yearly basis, the Animal Encounter is saving hundreds of reptiles, migratory birds and mammals. In addition, a successful captive breeding programme for certain species like partridge, striped hyaenas, badgers, and jackals has been established.

ONGOING PROJECTS

1. Educational programs, including awareness sessions towards wildlife conservation and eco-activities for students and public from all over Lebanon.

2. Funded by the Ford Motor Company Grants for Conservation and Environment, the centre is getting 3000 students from rural villages of limited income from all over Lebanon to attend the Educational programs towards wildlife conservation.

3. Conservation of bats and their habitat in Lebanon.

4. Status, distribution and conservation of red squirrel in Horch Ehdn Nature Reserve in North Lebanon.