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ARABIA'S HIDDEN VALLEY
A unique habitat in Dhofar captures Arabia's past

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Fig.1. A rare splash of green on the Arabian coast, Khor Kharfot was once an inlet open to the Indian Ocean. In recent centuries a high sand bank has formed across the bay, visible in this view looking west from the nearby mountains.

INTRODUCTION

A secluded valley on the southern coast of Dhofar in Oman is a unique microcosm of a distant era in Arabia's past. It is the last vestige in Oman of the subtropical deciduous forests that flourished in parts of Arabia anciently. Fed by monsoonal run-off from the Qamar mountains that have isolated it, Khor Kharfot protects an extensive range of fauna and flora. Some extant species, such as the Arabian Leopard (*Panthera pardus nimr*), are critically-endangered. However, other species are known of only anecdotally as no thorough survey in any field has yet been made. The opportunity to do so, and to perhaps implement protective strategies, is fast vanishing as this once pristine site is now under severe environmental stress.

After sailing along the eastern coast of Arabia on the survey ship Palinuris in 1824, the British geographer Andrew Crichton was unimpressed, writing that the coast was "a wall of naked rocks as dismal and barren as can well be conceived" (FOSTER 1844). These words were thought accurate enough as a general description of the eastern Arabian coastline to be published quite recently (PHILLIPS 1966). Other travelers, before and long after Crichton, left no mention of exceptions to this uninviting perception. It included the Qamar coast, a twenty mile stretch of abrupt limestone mountains pushed up eons ago when Arabia separated from the African continent. These mountains constitute the westernmost coast of the Sultanate of Oman.

What lay hidden from the view of all those passing ships still surprises the visitor today, for reaching the sea in the midst of those mountains is a valley almost defiantly lush with greenery, Khor Kharfot. Its name encapsulates its two main features: the Arabic Khor refers to a sea inlet; while Kharfot is an expression in the pre-Arabic Mahri tongue, meaning that "abundance" has arrived following the annual monsoon rains.

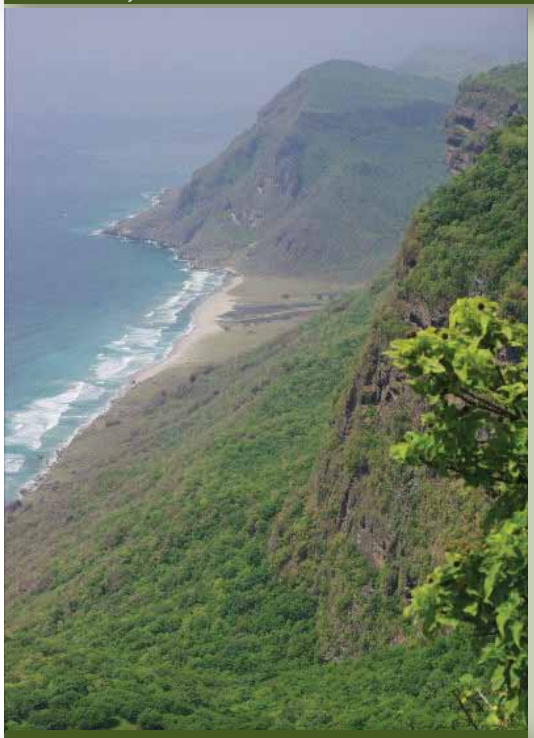

Fig.2. The dark green base of Kharfot today lies below sea-level. This view looking north-east from the surrounding hills shows the approximate contours of the original sea inlet. Today it is a year-round freshwater lagoon, a unique eco-system that has remained pristine until now.

A UNIQUE ENVIRONMENT

It is small wonder that the outside world was slow to recognize that such an anomaly was preserved on the Arabian coast; after all, even people in the region were scarcely aware of it until recent decades. Without road access and hemmed in by forbidding terrain, Kharfot is unpopulated and has had no inhabitants in living memory. The ocean once extended inland perhaps a kilometer here, creating a sheltered inlet. Now, in common with the other inlets in southern Oman, a sandbar stretches across the mouth of the bay, closing it from the sea. At Kharfot, the inlet has been replaced by an extensive freshwater lagoon.

Kharfot marks the end of a major wadi leading from the interior desert, Wadi Sayq ("River Valley") and the much shorter (12 km) Wadi Kharfot (EL-BAZ 2004), but this fact is hidden by the oblique angle at which the two wadis arrive at the coast. The high beach obscures the lagoon and most of the vegetation and trees from passing ships. In fact, viewed from the sea, Kharfot appears rather unremarkable.

Fig.3. Wadi Sayq ("River Valley") winds its way through more than twenty miles of the Qamar Mountains before arriving at the coast at Khor Kharfot. The deeply scoured base of the wadi is testament to the annual floodwater that runs through to Kharfot, just out of sight in the distance to the right.

Each May to September the Indian Ocean monsoon rains touch land only in southern Oman, bringing constant rain and mist. Forced higher by the mountains, the clouds release their moisture quickly along a narrow band of coast, leaving the interior deserts dry. Until recent years substantial water arrived at Kharfot through the sinuous Wadi Sayq, the main drainage of the Qamar ranges, as it descends some 38 km from the interior plateau. The water reaching the inlet accumulates in the lagoon, but it also feeds two large permanent springs.

Fig.4. Kharfot is one of only two wadis in Oman that receive three months of steady rain every year from the Indian Ocean monsoon. In this view mists and clouds arrive at Kharfot where they are immediately forced higher by the terrain and release their water.