

ARABIA'S HIDDEN VALLEY Continued

Biodiversity at Kharfot

The abundant water results in an unusual micro-environment (JOURNAL OF OMAN STUDIES 1977, 1980). A spectrum of luxuriant vegetation lining the sides of the bay includes large trees, notably Tamarind (*Tamarindus indica*), Sycamore Fig (*Ficus sycamorus*) and various Acacia species. On the higher terrain inland, Frankincense and Myrrh trees are a living reminder that Arabia's greatest commercial activity before the discovery of oil, incense production, began in this area. Both gums are still harvested by local families and sold locally. In addition to figs, wild passion-fruit and other edible species on offer, clusters of date palms stand close to the beach. Some 800 other plant species are believed to grow in the region, pollinated by wild honey-bees, providing an impressive range of possible resources.

Wildlife here, as any visitor can attest, is prolific. Whale, dolphin and whale-shark species thrive in the almost-untapped waters and the area's beaches have recently been declared a protected area for two turtle species known to nest there. Ashore, indications of other rare animals such as the hyena and wolf have often been noted by local villagers. The Rock Hyrax and a variety of porcupine, fox, snakes and lizards are readily seen. Most significantly, the numerous caves and gullies are home to a handful of the Arabian Leopard (*Panthera pardus nimr*), a sub-species now listed as Critically Endangered (SPALTON et al. 2006). It is estimated that about 50 leopards are left in all of Dhofar.



Fig.8. The warm Indian Ocean attracts a huge variety of fish.

Abundant bird-life, both resident and migrating species, has attracted a trickle of ornithologists; at least one species never seen before in Arabia, the brilliantly coloured Malachite Kingfisher (*Alcedo cristata*), was first recorded at Kharfot in September 2000 (BIRDS OMAN 2000).

Occasional human presence

Visitors today also see the more familiar shapes of cattle and camels, brought down from the mountain villages above to graze. Herders and local fishermen, who occasionally visit for easy catches of fish, lobster and sardine in the untapped waters of the bay, are normally the only human presence in this pristine ecosystem.

There are abundant signs, however, that people have lived here intermittently. Among the numerous ruins overlooking the bay, Paolo Costa of the University of Bologna, one of the few archaeologists to have visited the site, has traced at least four periods of settlement. They show waves of human activity dating from the distant Neolithic, thousands of years ago, to after the arrival of Islam in the seventh century. The outline of a tiny mosque sits, oriented toward Mecca, not far from older, more enigmatic structures (COSTA 1994). To better understand these other ruins more research will be necessary, but their presence assures us that Kharfot's marine and land-based resources can support a human population.

Fig.5. Illustrative of the ancient forest remnant surviving at Kharfot is this mature Tamarind tree *Tamarindus indica* growing near the beach.

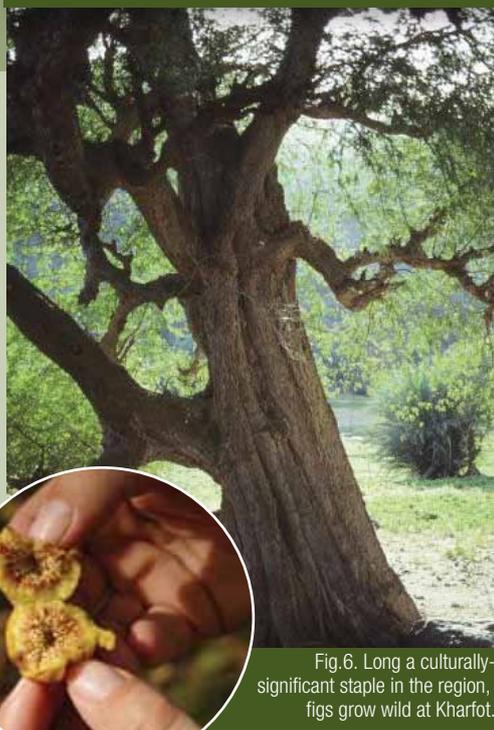


Fig.6. Long a culturally-significant staple in the region, figs grow wild at Kharfot.



Fig.7. The large freshwater lagoon is fed by two year-round springs and is the basis for the remarkable range of fauna and flora at Khor Kharfot.

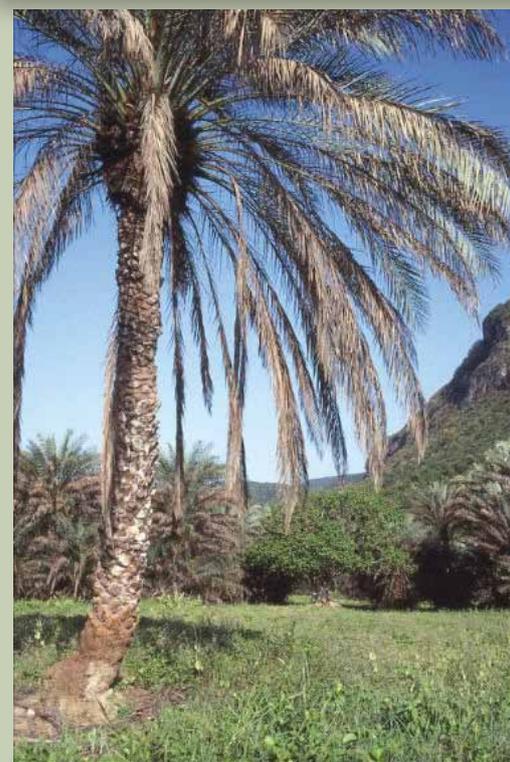


Fig.9. A cluster of date palms growing near the beach.