

ARABIA'S HIDDEN VALLEY Continued

Dr Costa points out that despite its many attractive features, people seem to have not remained long at Kharfot because of the difficulty in accessing it, other than entering via the long Wadi Sayq from the desert, or perhaps by sea. Then too, the four months of rain and high winds each year would discourage long-term settlement. A leading authority on the ancient incense trade, Nigel Groom of London, has suggested that the bay should be considered a possibility for the site of "Moscha," an important trading port spoken of in early classical writings (GROOM 1995). For the time being Groom's idea remains speculative, but certainly all the features needed for a small port exist here, perhaps one where ships collected incense and re-supplied with fresh water, fruit, honey and meat.

21st century challenges

Kharfot's unique concentration of fauna and flora led to it being designated in 1987 as a "Site of Special Value" by the government of Oman's Planning Committee for Development and Environment in the Southern Region, in 1990 becoming a "Nature Reserve" within the larger Jabal al-Qamar Scenic Reserve. This action gave it formal protected status. On November 4th, 1991 Kharfot was chosen for inspection by HRH The Duke of Edinburgh, Prince Philip, along with Omani officials, in his role of International President of the Worldwide Fund for Nature. Such steps and local recognition of the turtle nesting on its beaches have been important in protecting the bay.



Fig.12. An ancient circle of stones on the very edge of an eroding cliff becomes a potent reminder of the urgent need for research and conservation in this unique valley.

But this most fertile of Arabian environments remains poorly documented. Truly comprehensive biological surveys of many parts of Oman, indeed much of the Arabian Peninsula, are still in the early stages. One assessment in 2000 still largely reflects the situation in 2012 (VICTOR 2000); another recent study noted that most valley forest sites in southwest Arabia had not been surveyed for over 15 years (HALL et al. 2009). However, efforts are currently underway across a variety of disciplines to more completely survey Arabia's biodiversity (see, for example, HALL & MILLER 2011). Their geographical isolation has ensured that the Qamar ranges and the adjoining Mahra province in Yemen, still remain possibly the least understood parts of Arabia.

Over just the past decade, however, the growing awareness of southern Dhofar's attractions has seen a spurt of development. Local people have begun seeing concrete benefits from the increased attention. A magnificent new road along the coast now links the area with Yemen. Visiting geologists have found indications of iron deposits that may offer commercial possibilities. There is also growing interest from domestic, regional and specialized international tourist operators. Like other countries in the region, Oman is keen to develop responsible cultural and adventure-based tourism against the day when oil reserves dwindle. Places that preserve the past naturally, as Kharfot does, will be of particular interest to conservation-minded visitors wanting to see a unique place, one at odds with the popular stereotypes of Arabia.

As so often happens, however, the impact of development upon a fragile environment is already evident. Most damaging to Kharfot's environs is a water-pumping station in Wadi Sayq that supplies the villages in the surrounding mountain. The diversion of thousands of litres of water every hour, around the clock, from reaching Kharfot is having a serious impact, one most evident in the steady contraction of the freshwater lagoon in the centre of the inlet. In just a short time we can expect to see the impact on the flora, especially the larger trees species, and then, inevitably, upon the fauna of an ecosystem that is still poorly understood.

Fig.10. The first report in the Arabian Peninsula of the Malachite Kingfisher *Alcedo cristata* came from Kharfot in September 2000.



Fig.11. Late afternoon sunshine highlights a complex of large ruins on the east side of the bay.

With increased safeguards in place we can hope that Kharfot's relic fauna and flora populations may still be able to reverse their decline. For a little longer this impressively fertile valley is a reminder that there are still hidden corners of this world that capture the distant past.

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Full references are available in the online version.