

# WHERE ARE WE IN TERMS OF ARABIAN ORYX CONSERVATION?

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### Introduction

The people of Arabia remain fascinated by the Arabian oryx because of its seemingly uncanny ability to survive in one of the harshest desert environments on the planet. Elsewhere, this desert ungulate similarly intrigues people, in part also due to the fact that they were brought back to the deserts of Arabia following extinction in the wild in 1972.

But where are we in terms of Arabian oryx conservation today, 45 years after “Operation Oryx” and 25 years since the first Arabian oryx reintroduction into the wild? Moreover, which pertinent decisions do we need to take to facilitate the survival of the Arabian oryx in these and other reintroduction sites over the next 50 years and more?

### Reintroduction sites

Reintroduction is defined as “the intentional movement of an organism into a part of its native, historic range from which it disappeared due to either human disturbance or catastrophe.” This article deals with three Arabian oryx reintroductions in the Arabian Peninsula, notably into the unfenced Arabian Oryx Sanctuary of Oman and Saudi Arabia’s Mahazat As-Sayd and ‘Uruq Bani Ma’arid Protected Areas. In each of these reintroductions the explicit aim was the establishment of a viable, self-sustainable population in natural Arabian oryx habitat.

While various successes have been achieved along the way, and while a lot has been learnt about reintroduction procedures and oryx biology, things have, however, not been going according to plan with regards to regional Arabian oryx conservation. This is despite the fact that awareness about oryx conservation among the Arabian public is undoubtedly higher today than at any time during the previous 45 years.

#### Arabian Oryx Sanctuary (33 920 km<sup>2</sup>)

At one time a major conservation success story, the more recent history of this oryx population has been less encouraging. Today the population consists of an estimated 60-70 male oryx while significant numbers of female oryx have been absent in the wild for almost a decade now. However, the fact that approximately 100 females are being held in captivity suggests that this population could in future be re-established again. Moreover, definite

steps have been taken to increase - and thereby ensure - the future security of this oryx population.

During August 2007, however, the Arabian Oryx Sanctuary, and therefore also regional conservation efforts, suffered further setbacks when it was decided to decrease the size of the sanctuary by 90%. This, in turn, resulted in the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) removing the Arabian Oryx Sanctuary from its list of World Heritage Sites – the first time ever that this has happened in the history of UNESCO. The World Heritage Site Committee was quite clear with regards to the reasons for its unprecedented decision by stating: “After extensive consultation with the State Party, the Committee felt that the unilateral reduction in the size of the Sanctuary and plans to proceed with hydrocarbon prospecting would destroy the value and integrity of the property, which is also home to other endangered species including, the Arabian Gazelle and houbara bustard” (UNESCO Press Release No.2007-82).

#### Mahazat As-Sayd Protected Area (2 244 km<sup>2</sup>)

Currently this population of more than 850 animals is the only viable, self-sustainable Arabian oryx population in the peninsula. However, an earlier population model suggested that the success of this population in combination with the fenced nature of the area could be its downfall over the long term. Variability in rainfall and the resulting periodic food shortages could lead to large-scale population fluctuations and even extinction. Food shortages have already occurred within the area during some years with relatively large numbers of animals dying as a result. However, due to the



Figure 1. Despite recent setbacks, wild oryx herds could again become a common site in the Arabian Oryx Sanctuary of Oman (© Maartin Strauss).