WHERE ARE WE IN TERMS OF ARABIAN ORYX CONSERVATION? ...Continue

variability of the environment in the peninsula it seems highly unlikely that Arabian oryx ever occurred in stable, high-density populations over any significant time period. This is in stark contrast to the situation that is being advocated for the area. Management suggestions - such as the annual removal of "surplus" animals to keep the population at a relatively stable level or the construction of waterholes to try and sustain animals through drought periods - could have far reaching effects for the oryx population and the entire protected area.

'Uruq Bani Ma'arid Protected Area (12 500 km²)

The population in this unfenced area persists 12 years later because of frequent supplementary releases. Of the three protected areas considered, this undoubtedly has the harshest climate, and at last count this population was estimated at ≤ 150 animals - less than the total number of animals released into the area to date. It seems plausible that this population might not be able to become self-sustainable over the long-term and that it might have to be managed as part of a larger Saudi Arabian meta-population.

Each of these reintroduced populations faces serious challenges that need to be addressed to ensure long-term survival. It is imperative to realise that each population has to be managed to a greater or lesser extent to ensure long-term survival. Imaginative ways of making use of relatively large numbers of surplus animals need to be investigated as a matter of urgency.

The future

But what else can be done, considering all that has been previously? It is worth reiterating that the existence of a species recovery plan is not an end in itself; the performance and shortcomings of programmes should be assessed regularly. Without goals and targets to be achieved – and the regular review of these - little progress will be made. Also of particular importance is clarifying the role of private collections in the various conservation strategies. A recent estimate puts the total number of oryx in the region at 8,000 animals - the majority of which are in captivity. Unfortunately however, there is a general lack of genetic management in many of the captive populations, which implies that these animals are of dubious conservation value.

It is therefore estimated that a maximum of 20% of all the oryx in the peninsula are currently of known conservation value. Those collections that can potentially contribute to conservation needs to be identified and breeding management plans should be agreed upon, implemented and adhered to. It is therefore encouraging to note that the Coordinating Committee for the Conservation of the Arabian Oryx (CCCAO), formed in 1999, has recently again initiated regional meetings to try and find ways of addressing these issues. It is essential, however, that these gatherings result in concrete and measurable conservation action.

Figure 2. Oryx in 'Uruq Bani Ma'arid are subjected to highly variable environmental conditions and a long-term metapopulation management approach could help ensure population persistence (© Maartin Strauss).

Although progress have been made over the last 45 years, the 2001 consensus reached by regional biologists, administrators and other stakeholders that the status of the Arabian oryx should be changed from "endangered" to "vulnerable", has been premature and over-optimistic. There are still considerable problems to overcome to ensure the future survival of the Arabian oryx in the deserts of Arabia. These are made all the more difficult by the rampant economic development that has again commenced in the region. Recently Saudi Arabia's Minister of Economy and Planning announced: "By 2009, we intend to eradicate poverty from the country" (Arab News, Wednesday 25 April 2005). This is highly commendable but it should proceed in conjunction with the other Millennium Developments Goals, including environmental sustainability and everything that it entails.

Ensuring the survival of the Arabian oryx and other species/ecosystems in the region is too important a task to delegate to conservation organisations only. There is a need for conservation to become a priority area for both national and regional governments; something that has unfortunately been lacking to a large extent. There are cascading effects in operation here: if governments don't take conservation seriously, as indicated by long-term commitment, sufficient funding and stringent laws and penalties (amongst other things) to back-up their conservation organisations, some sectors of society won't take it seriously either. Moreover, conservation organisations and governments need to sell conservation locally; grabbing the attention of the people of Arabia will facilitate successful, sustainable conservation. This could be done in any number of ways and it is important that due attention is given to attracting local, talented, young professionals into biology in general and into conservation biology in particular. This is something that remains lacking across much of the region.

While admitting the serious conservation challenges that remain, significant progress has been made since 1972. However, a lot more needs to be done in the populations already established, captive populations and possibly additional reintroduction sites to ensure the long-term survival of the Arabian oryx in the region.

A longer, fully referenced version of this contribution is available on the WME website.

Maartin Strauss is a wildlife biologist with extensive experience in the Middle East, having worked on reintroduction projects in both the Sultanate of Oman and Saudi Arabia. The opinions expressed here are his own and do not necessarily reflect those of his previous employers in either of these countries.