

## AL AIN ZOO— CHANGES NOW AND FOR THE FUTURE

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Al Ain Zoo, United Arab Emirates.

Al Ain Zoo is undergoing a period of significant change, not only in its physical appearance but in every area of operation and management.

As the new Director, taking up my position in January 2006, I have been charged with developing not only a 'new zoo' for Al Ain, but also for the Emirate of Abu Dhabi. As a result and with the help of a strong staff team, we have undertaken a program of 'rapid improvements'. These involve upgrading existing good exhibits to a much higher standard of presentation, the introduction of environmental enrichment techniques and the demolition of old and outdated cages.



African lions with cubs born at zoo ©Xavier Eichaker 2006

Areas that have been a priority for change have included the main entrance, surrounding gardens, flamingo exhibit, a mixed Arabian exhibit and a mixed African savannah display. The latter is an area of 5 hectares that will allow fringe eared oryx (*Oryx gazella callotis*), Thompson gazelle (*Gazella thomsoni*), zebra (*Equus burchelli boehmi*), dama gazelle (*Gazella dama ruficollis*), ostrich (*Struthio camelus australis*), wildebeest (*Connochaetes taurinus al-bojubatus*) and giraffe (*Giraffa camelopardalis camelopardalis*) to roam freely together. A series of dry moats protects the tree plantation from the giraffes but, allows the free movement of other species.

A number of waterholes provide perfect views of these animals in a naturalistic setting, particularly in the morning and at the end of the day. An upgraded 'look out tower' provides the visitor with panoramic views of the African savannah with the foothills of Jabel Hafeet as a stunning backdrop. Work will soon commence on a safari-style drive through the lion exhibit and a new chimpanzee display.

The introduction of a new organisational structure has provided the framework for a more efficient working team and improved management procedures which has facilitated its governance as an independent organisation, separate from the Al Ain municipality. This has required a change in policy, procedures and infrastructure, all of which are being implemented now.

The Zoo's core business of conservation, education, research and recreation will be the cornerstones of the new cultural and management changes being implemented at all areas of operation. A new Education Centre is being constructed that will facilitate "in-house" education programmes based on wildlife discovery, conservation of endangered species and the role of modern zoos. Students of all ages will be given a full comprehensive program by our own trained staff. It is also hoped that university students will be able to undertake project work here and assist in establishing a strong partnership between Al Ain Zoo and Higher Education organisations.

A strong partnership has also been established with the Environment Agency in Abu Dhabi, which has resulted in the Zoo assisting with the introduction of Arabian oryx (*Oryx leucoryx*) to a protected site in the Emirate of Abu Dhabi. Further conservation programmes are currently being developed.

The Zoo is now a full institutional member of the World Association of Zoos and Aquariums (WAZA), a donor for the Conservation Breeding Specialist Group (CBSG) and member of the International Species Information System (ISIS). All of these three zoo based organisations will assist Al Ain Zoo in establishing it as a conservation based zoological institution striving for best practice in captive animal management.

The Al Ain Zoo now covers a total area of 850 hectares and is the largest zoo facility in the Middle East. About 50 hectares of "core zoo" is currently managed for public display with a further 20 hectares set aside for off limit breeding and species management programmes. Further plans are well underway to develop the remaining area of the site to include desert-themed exhibits, a safari park, walking trails and accommodation. As we develop the concepts and feasibility plans, more details will become available, but certainly the project will provide a major wildlife tourist destination within the UAE.

The reinvention of an old zoo and development of a new one is certainly a challenge, but one the team at Al Ain Zoo is supporting and is actively implementing.



*Gazella thomsoni* & *Gazella dama ruficollis* ©Xavier Eichaker 2006

Since my arrival in the UAE in January 2006, I have been greatly encouraged by the number of wildlife facilities and the high standard of their management. Many have healthy captive populations of some of the most endangered wildlife in the Arabian peninsula and beyond. I have also noticed that many of our organisations work in isolation of each other. As a newcomer I am sure there are valid reasons for this lack of obvious cooperation, but see a need and distinct advantage in working together on wildlife issues. As someone who has worked closely with many zoos around the world and experienced the diversity of knowledge and expertise available throughout the zoo community and zoo associations, it seems logical that we actively work towards this goal.

To this end, I am of the strong opinion that there is a need for a zoo association in this region. The idea of a formal "Middle East Zoological Association" would allow for the exchange of knowledge, expertise, animals and ideas while providing a framework of regional wildlife cooperation. I have contacted a number of zoos in the region about this idea and to date the feedback has been very positive.

I would like to pursue this idea further and its potential by hosting a regional workshop on the feasibility and nature of a Middle East Zoo Association. I welcome comments from colleagues within the region (and beyond) direct to my email address mark.craig@alainzoo.ae