

TAYF

The Soqatra Newsletter



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Highlights

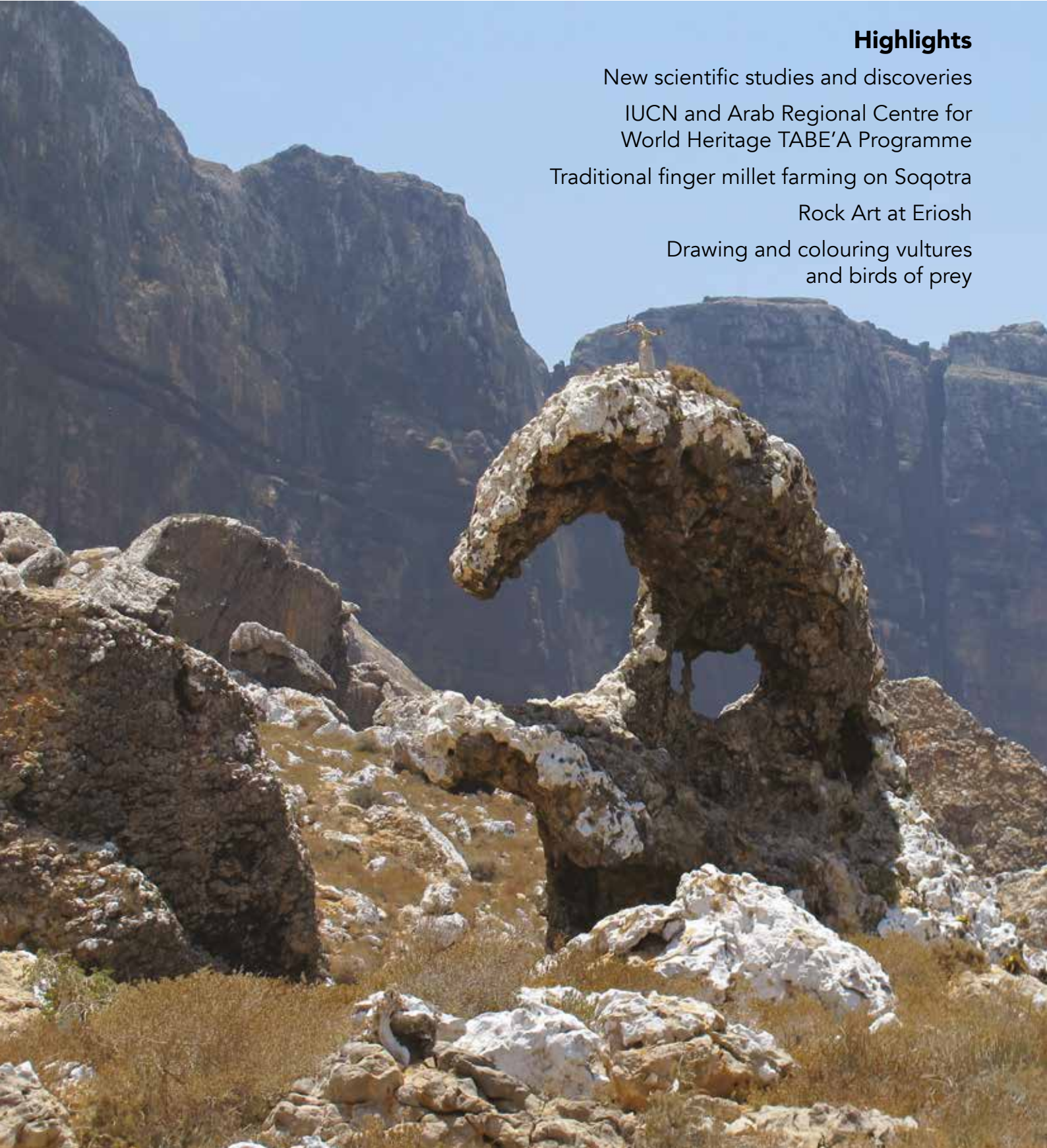
New scientific studies and discoveries

IUCN and Arab Regional Centre for
World Heritage TABE'A Programme

Traditional finger millet farming on Soqatra

Rock Art at Eriosh

Drawing and colouring vultures
and birds of prey



Soqatra - An Inspiration for the TABE'A Programme

**Haifaa Abdulhalim,
TABE'A Programme Manager,
IUCN & Arab Regional Centre
for World Heritage**

The TABE'A programme, launched in 2011, is an IUCN Programme for natural World Heritage Sites in the Arab States. By 2014, IUCN signed a partnership agreement with the Arab Regional Centre for World Heritage (ARC-WH) which is located in Manama, Kingdom of Bahrain, and which started to host the TABE'A programme from then on. In Soqatra, the programme's intervention started in 2013 by the launch of a joint project between IUCN and ARC-WH which had the aim to develop the local Environment Protection Authority's technical capacities and its strategic planning framework.

Due to the armed conflict which started in Yemen in March 2014, the continuation of the programme's activities in Soqatra was almost impossible due to impaired access to the Islands. By 2016, due to the new circumstances after the two cyclones *Chapala* and *Megh* which hit the Archipelago, ARC-WH and its partners conducted a workshop to develop an Emergency Response Plan (ERP). This plan was developed to mitigate the impacts of the cyclones and the civil war in the country. Additionally, a fundraising event was held with support from the German Embassy in Bahrain. Furthermore, ARC-

Photograph: Solar system installation on Samha.
© Ismael Salem, ARC-WH.



Photograph: Dragons Blood Tree © Haifaa Abdulhalim, IUCN

WH hired a focal point in Soqatra to be able to provide all possible assistance to the local authorities.

ARC-WH, through the TABE'A programme, works together in partnership with Friends of Soqatra (FoS) to implement projects that respond to the needs of the local community and the environment of Soqatra through sustainable, eco-friendly projects. Firstly, the plans focused on the restoration and rehabilitation of the damaged *Kareefs* – rainwater

harvesting systems. Secondly, it aimed to restore a damaged habitat of important plant species. The area was fenced in order to exclude animals from grazing inside and to let the vegetation regenerate naturally. This project also included the implementation of a monitoring programme.

In 2015, ARC-WH's focal point in Soqatra, Mr. Ismael Mohammed

Salem, was on the Island of Samha - which forms part of the Soqatra Archipelago - assessing the impacts of the aforementioned cyclones and to implement a Friends of Soqatra project which aimed at repairing damaged boats. In the evenings, residents would gather in a small yard to watch the only

existing TV on the island. The spectators were unable to hear anything since the electrical generator powering the TV was so loud in close distance. "This was a source

of inspiration. I

felt that something needed to be done here" Ismael said. As a result, an idea arose for a project to provide a source of energy to improve the wellbeing of the islanders. ARC-WH managed to allocate donations with the generous support from H.E Abdulrahman Al Iriani, from the Al Acacia Foundation, to support the installation of solar panels on the Island. However, this project had a much bigger

ARC-WH, through the TABE'A programme, works together in partnership with Friends of Soqatra (FoS) to implement projects that respond to the needs of the local community and the environment of Soqatra through sustainable eco-friendly projects.

impact than initially expected: the people on Samha started to use the village lights generated through these solar panels as a type of lighthouse to guide fishermen at night-time back home to the island. Additionally, the generated light also allows students to now study at night. Furthermore, the newly gained electricity provides energy to the long-wave radio station, which is the only source of communication with the rest of the world.

ARC-WH also has a great interest in the unique cultural heritage of Soqatra and its endangered language. In 2017, ARC-WH started collaborating with the Freie Universität Berlin and the Centre for Middle Eastern Plants – part of the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh - as well as local partners to revive the 'Soqatra Poetry Competition' festival. This project was generously funded by the British Council. The festival tradition was initiated by a local association in 2008, where thousands of people attended. One of the aims of the festival was to encourage the use of the Socotri language which is threatened by extinction and its rich poetry tradition. However, the implementation of the festival was stopped for several years due to the lack of funding. This festival revival in 2017 was highly successful and thousands of Socotris were able to attend.

In conclusion, Soqatra has always been an inspiration for ARC-WH and the TABE'A programme. When investigating the history of human existence in Soqatra and its rich biodiversity, one notices that these societies are instinctual conservers of nature and have always lived in harmony with nature. Therefore, the Programme utilises this local traditional know-how and assists the people of Soqatra to maintain this delicate balance especially in light of new developments occurring.

Photograph: Soqatra poetry competition
© Ismael Salem, ARC-WH.



Photograph: packs of collected firewood on the way to Diksam. Photo credit: aljazeera.net

Could “improved cooking stoves” be a good solution to minimize wood consumption in Soqatra?

Abdulwasea Mohammed Amer, Technical Officer, GIZ Conservation and Sustainable use of Biodiversity Programme in Yemen

Cooking Gas is the habitual source for cooking energy in Soqatra, at least in the two most inhabited small cities of Hadiboh and Qalansiyah. However, cooking gas is not always available. The island experienced several cooking gas shortages in the last few years due to the conflict on the mainland constraining supply. In rural areas, people use wood to satisfy their cooking needs, even when gas is available, in order to avoid the burden of gas price variations. The longest time the island experienced lack of cooking gas was for two years in 2015 and 2016 during which people collected wood to satisfy their cooking needs. That created a serious threat to the unique biodiversity, as collecting wood for cooking became a source of income. Not only dead wood was collected but live trees and plants were taken out of the ecosystems for the necessity of human survival.

In line for suitable solutions, an inception study for the “introduction of improved cooking stoves in Yemen” was implemented by GIZ Program on Conservation and Sustainable Use of Biodiversity in Yemen (BioDiv) in cooperation with GIZ Private Sector



Photograph: ZamaZama wood stove.
Photo credit: Rocket Works channel (YouTube.com).

Development Project Yemen (PSDP). Based on successful experiments, the study suggested that, “the introduction of firewood stoves in Soqatra seems very feasible and effective to reduce pressure on the natural resources”. Reducing the wood portion used for cooking, yet satisfying cooking needs for local households, seems acceptable in contrast to banning the collection of firewood as cooking energy. This would be perceived by local communities as unrealistic or unethical. During times of gas shortages, shifting to wood collection as a source for cooking energy forms a serious challenge for Soqatra’s unique biodiversity. Having an effective idea or product that might reduce the potential impacts of similar challenges in the future is worth being investigated further, brought to existence, and introduced to Soqatra by the most cost-effective means.

Vladimir Agafonov

This folk tale was known in Soqotra in the 1970s as a story of "gimsh". Gimsh is a lizard, Soqotra's skink (*Trachylepis Soqotrana*, endemic to the island), although it is only an actor of the first episode of this unending story. It starts when this retrogressive creature destroys plans of the Soqotran trickster to develop his own agriculture.

The story is initially without end and it is a game and a competition - you should not only remember the right order of the parts beginning from part two (the first episode is commonly known and gets the right start to the whole fabula) but you also should say the refrain which gets bigger and bigger with every new part said in that same way in which the parts of the story have been said! And it is also fun and entertainment - as well as good training for a young brain. The peoples of many countries have such tales, and scientists call them 'cumulative tales' (or 'chain tales', or 'progressive tales'). They are built from short fragments - both funny

Ali Batael and his kitchen garden

and silly - and this is babies' and young children's classics with action, short dialogues, inner rhythm and a tongue-breaking rhymed final sentence of each part in which every new action is mentioned alongside the repetition of all that happened before!

Above this, in this tale its hero is

Above this, in this tale its hero is Ali Batael - an essential trickster of the Soqotri tale folklore (his name appears to be going from the name of fox in Arabic South Arabian dialects).

Ali Batael - an essential trickster of the Soqotri tale folklore (his name appears

to come from the name of fox in Arabic South Arabian dialects).

This gives an additional attractiveness to the tale because, as Encyclopædia Britannica

defines this type of folklore protagonists, "simultaneously an omniscient creator

One day Ali Batael decided to try his hand at agriculture. He found a piece of land, cleared it of stones and brush-wood, dug the earth and made a kitchen garden. After a little time his kitchen garden began to grow, now he had only to water it and to wait for a harvest. But that didn't happen.

One day, when Ali Batael came to check his kitchen garden he saw that it was all ruined. The plants had been eaten or trampled on. A big lizard was creeping over the kitchen garden and eating what was left.

"Oh no!" cried Ali. "Oh, lizard! You have eaten all my kitchen garden I grew with my own hands!"

"Well" said the lizard. "Take my old small leather pail!"

Ali Batael took that leather pail and went along the road. When he was near a well he saw there were girls gathered by the well, each one had a big pot for water.

"Hey Ali!" cried out the girls. "Give us your leather pail to get water from the well."

"But what if it breaks?" Ali Batael asked them.

"If it breaks you will receive its price back!"

When the girls began to lift water from the well with the leather pail, the pail broke completely.

"Oh, girls!" cried Ali Batael. "You have broken my pail, and the pail was given to me by the lizard, and the lizard ate my kitchen garden which I grew with my own hands!"

The girls gave him an old shawl which was full of holes. He took it and went down the road along the sea coast.

Suddenly he saw there were fishermen gathered on the sea coast fishing.

"Hey Ali!" cried out the fishermen. "Give us your shawl which is full of holes! Our net is broken and we cannot fish."

"But what if you break it?" said Ali Batael.

"If it breaks you will receive its price back!" said the fishermen.

When the fishermen began to fish with the shawl with the holes, it did break.

"Oh!" cried Ali Batael. "Oh, fishermen! You have broken my shawl

with the holes and it was given to me by the girls who broke my leather pail, which was given to me by the lizard, which ate all my kitchen garden which I grew with my own hands!"

The fishermen gave him a big fish.

Ali Batael took this fish and put it over a bush of prickles, lay down under it, closed his eyes and fell asleep. While he slept, an eagle came from the sky and ate his fish. When Ali Batael awoke he cried:

"Oh, eagle! You have eaten my fish which was given to me by the fishermen who broke the shawl with the holes, which was given to me by the girls who broke my leather pail, which was given to me by the lizard who ate my kitchen garden which I grew with my own hands!"

The eagle gave him a cord from his head.

Ali Batael took this cord and went along the road. He saw there was a woman standing near the road with her little son. In one hand she had a ball of wool, in the other a sack of goods.

"Hey Ali!" cried out the woman.

and an innocent fool, a malicious destroyer and a childlike prankster, the trickster-hero serves as a sort of folkloric scapegoat onto which are projected the fears, failures, and unattained ideals of the source culture... the trickster is "going along," encounters a situation to which he responds with knavery, stupidity, gluttony, or guile (or, most often, some combination of these), and meets a violent or ludicrous end. Often the trickster serves as a transformer and culture hero who creates order out of chaos." (www.britannica.com/art/trickster-tale)

It is retold into English (and Russian as well) having been recorded as numerous fragments in different parts of Soqatra, but mostly in Muri area near the highlands. The order of the parts, except the starting episode, may differ from the traditional (I hope, only a little - but critics are welcomed) and some realities that are commonly known in Soqotra like 'gimsh', or 'mishyo', or 'gisfa', or 'suido' and others are given in a descriptive way.

"Give me your cord! My son is very tired. I will carry him on my back, tie him on with the cord and go along the road slowly."

"But what if the cord breaks?" said Ali Batael.

"If the cord breaks you will receive its price back!"

When the woman began to tie her son to her back the cord broke!

"Oh no, woman!" cried Ali Batael.

"My cord is broken which was given to me by the eagle, which ate my fish, which was given to me by the fishermen, who broke my shawl with the holes which was given to me by the girls, who broke my leather pail, which was given to me by the lizard, which ate my kitchen garden which I grew with my hands!"

The woman gave him a stick, and he went along the road. Suddenly he saw Bedouins with their camels.

"Hey Ali!" cried out the Bedouins.

"Give us your stick! Our stick has broken and without it we cannot control our camels. But - don't worry! If it breaks you will receive its price back..."

Birds of the Middle East (including Soqotra): a new app for birdwatchers on your phone

Modified from original article by Dima Obeidat, "Ground-breaking Arabic app brings birdwatching to a new generation".

<http://www.birdlife.org/middle-east/news/ground-breaking-arabic-app-brings-birdwatching-new-generation>

Smartphones have become a popular way of communication for people in the main cities of Hadiboh and Qalansiyah, even though good internet connection is very expensive on the island. For eco-tourists, nature-loving tourists, guides and teachers who have a smartphone and internet access, an app for Birds of the Middle East is now freely available in Arabic for iPhones and iPads. The app was developed by BirdLife International and the Ornithological Society of the Middle East (OSME) and is, based on the book by Richard Porter and Simon Aspinall. The app took two years to develop, and this is the first ever purely Arabic-language nature field app. It was launched at the end of April 2018 at a conference in Abu Dhabi (Summit for Flyways) hosted by the International Fund for Houbara Conservation (IFHC) and organised by Birdlife International together with OSME, UN Environment and other organisations. The chairman of OSME, Rob Sheldon, expressed his excitement and happiness about the app for the new, modern generation of

Birds of the Middle East (including Soqotra) app INFO for iTunes:

SELLER: NatureGuides Ltd.

SIZE: 852.7 MB

COMPATIBILITY: Requires iOS 11.0 or later. Compatible with iPhone 5s and up, and iPad.

LANGUAGES: The app is ONLY in Arabic

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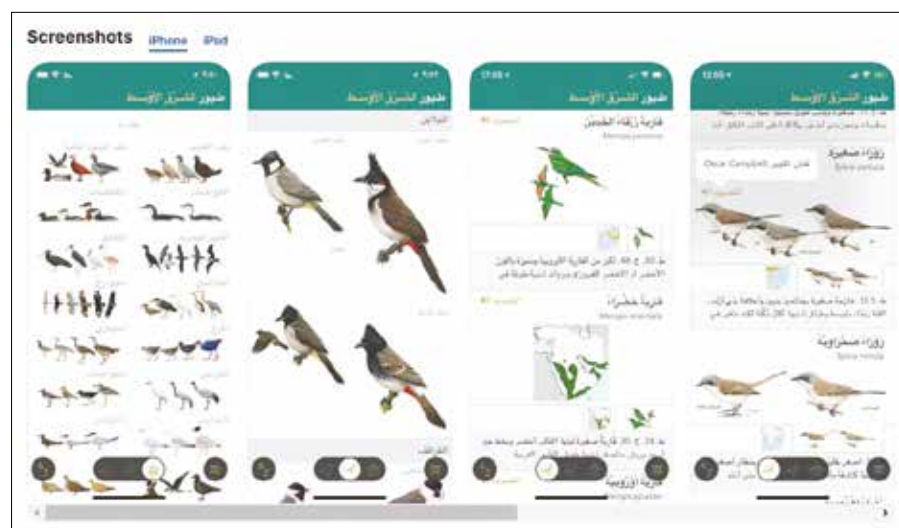
PRICE: Free

SOURCE: <https://itunes.apple.com/gb/developer/natureguides-ltd/id3110574314?mt=8>

The Birds of the Middle East app is also available in English, but this version is not free.

Both versions should be available soon for Android devices – please check the FoS website for updates.

nature enthusiasts in the Middle East. Richard Porter, who is a very active member of FoS and to whom we are very grateful for his continuous efforts in conservation and awareness of the birds of Soqotra, praised the efforts of BirdLife International and NatureGuides in transferring the book to an amazing novelty for the Middle East. Nature observations taken to the next level.



Revival of traditional finger millet farming in Soqotra

Photograph: millet harvest at Ridah Village 2017. Photo credit: Ghanem Alkubari



Abdulwasea Mohammed, Technical Officer, GIZ Conservation and Sustainable use of Biodiversity Programme in Yemen

Growing up in Soqotra Island makes it easy to observe the improvement of agriculture activities for different crops of vegetables and fruits around the island over the last two decades. There is no dispute that almost all vegetables and fruits were imported from the mainland in the years before the millennium - including essential vegetables for food preparation such as onions, tomatoes and chilies. Just a few years later, the island and its people were more exposed to the world. Important infrastructure such as road connections, airport and sea port eased communication processes and helped drive new experiences and yet humble innovations to local individuals and communities in Soqotra. In addition,

availability of media outlets (TV) and continuous agriculture awareness and most importantly support by the government, different international organizations, NGOs and projects has contributed to the improvement of agriculture in the island.

According to elders, finger millet was the most widely farmed crop in Soqotra

during times of isolation as an important source of food for local communities. Local people grow finger millet traditionally on terraces in fields surrounded by a wall of stones and fences on top to prevent the invasion of grazing livestock such as sheep and goats. For centuries, millet has been well known for its outstanding nutritious

value which makes it an important ingredient for the kitchen of rural communities. Not only the edible parts of the plant can be used, since also the plant stoves were used as fodder for the livestock which contributes to

reduce the pressure on natural resources. However; local people had given up farming millet due to the availability of alternative foods such as rice and wheat in the local

market. Local people believe that this is a major factor that led to giving up traditional finger millet farming. Thus, traditional millet farming fields were left empty for decades and the crop was threatened with extinction until the GIZ Conservation and Sustainable Use of Biodiversity Programme started the initiative of finger millet revival in

For centuries, millet has been well known for its outstanding nutritious value which makes it an important ingredient for the kitchen of rural communities.

Soqotra in 2013 through rehabilitation of traditional finger millet farming systems as part of its natural resources management component.

In harmonization with other development partners in the field of biodiversity and aligning behind the respective government policy and strategy in Yemen, and in coordination with its main partner the Environment Protection Authority (EPA) the programme operates at different levels of intervention,

an important level of which is implementing concrete measures on the Island of Soqotra

as a highly important Biodiversity Conservation Area in Yemen. In this context, among other activities, rehabilitation of traditional finger millet farming system has been identified to enhance local communities' resilience through providing a new source of income, food, and a modality for sustainable management of natural resources. Since 2013 to date, the project has financially and technically supported the rehabilitation of 172 fields of finger millet distributed in 38 villages in Soqotra. Up to date 530 families have directly benefited, in addition to more than 957 families that have indirectly benefited from this activity. The rehabilitation has been implemented by local communities through local subsidies, elected Community Development Committees (CDCs) provided with suitable trainings and technical support by the programme. Also, focus was made on enhancing the farming system, marketing, and production through providing farmers with specific trainings and creation of farmer field school activities to introduce best farming practices and techniques. During the implementation of projects and throughout the implementation stages, both women and men in targeted villages have benefited from the project activities and have earned their own income. Furthermore, the programme supported local communities to implement the rehabilitation of 80 millet fields in 14 villages in coordination with EPA and the Department of Agriculture

in Soqotra Island which was completed in April 2018. Approximately 299 families will directly benefit in addition to 637 families that will indirectly benefit from rehabilitation activities.

During 2017 the project conducted an evaluation of millet production in 72 fields from which 201 families (1197 individuals) are long-term beneficiaries in 15 villages. Results showed a total one season harvest of 9,080 kgs and targeted communities sold up to 50%

of the production thus generating income. Activities of finger millet revival contributed to improve the livelihood of

targeted communities. In this context, increased cereal production, food diversity (increased production of different fruits and vegetables) and sustainable income generation are remarkable success indicators as well as a good impact of the proposed innovations adopted by targeted local communities. This formed a motivation for local communities around the island, as 30 families started their own initiatives to grow millet without support from the programme.

Since the start of activities in Soqotra, the program worked in coordination with local authorities and various government institutions as well as local NGOs in Soqotra particularly with EPA and the Department of Agriculture which



Photograph: finger millet harvest

Today farming activities are spread around the island with remarkable improvements

are engaged in all stages of project implementation to ensure they gain experiences and management skills. As the programme ended in June 2018, it was very important to maintain the good impacts of finger millet rehabilitation initiative and ensure a long-term benefit for local communities as well as sustainable management of natural resources. The programme supported the Department of Agriculture to fully manage and supervise implementation of finger millet rehabilitation projects in nine villages (46 fields) in 2017 and 2018 as a preparation for the department to carry out potential natural resources management activities and initiatives in the future. Furthermore, the project provided various capacity building trainings for local authorities in Soqotra including EPA and the Department of Agriculture who were trained on "Project proposal writing skills and networking with national and international NGOs/donors". As a result, the Department of Agriculture established networking with the Yemeni Social Fund for Development (SFD) to which the department recently submitted a natural resources management project proposal for funding.

Today farming activities are spread around the island with remarkable improvements, thus different varieties of local millet cereal, fruits, and vegetables are available in the local market, not yet with big long-lasting quantities but still it shapes a good sign for a potential self-sufficiency for the island in the near future.

Report on Friends of Soqotra Conference & Annual General Meeting 2017

The 16th Conference and Annual General Meeting of the Friends of Soqotra (FoS) was hosted by the Natural History Museum in Bern, Switzerland, with Dr Eike Neubert as the main organizer, on 27-29 October 2017. Around 25 people attended including guests from Soqotra, Yemen, Bahrain, UK, Czech Republic, Italy, South Africa, Russia, Germany and Belgium.

The conference started on Saturday 28 October with a welcome address by Prof Dr Christian Kropf and Dr Eike Neubert on behalf of the hosting institute, followed by an introduction by the Deputy Governor for Environment and Development Affairs of Soqotra, Muhammad Abd al-Jamil Abdallah 'Ali, who is currently conducting his PhD research at the University of Kent (UK)

on sustainable tourism on Soqotra. The Deputy Governor expressed his sincere thanks for the ongoing efforts of the FoS and praised it as an organisation

that has been continuing yearly events as well as small-scale projects on the island over many years, despite ongoing difficult times in Yemen. He noted that these efforts are well received and emphasized the importance of continuous efforts by the international community in local education, awareness, sustainable development and conservation of the natural and cultural heritage on Soqotra.

The opening of the meeting was followed by presentations on the ongoing projects and research on the archipelago.

Dr Julian Jansen van Rensburg of the Freie Universität Berlin introduced



the start of a 30-month British Council funded project that aims to integrate Soqotra's cultural heritage with conservation, aiming at both tangible (e.g. archaeological sites) and intangible (e.g. language, traditions) culture. The project is led by the Royal

Botanic Garden Edinburgh (UK) and will focus on both the training in and further protection of cultural heritage, including efforts towards promoting the Soqotri language through poetry

competitions. The project also has a sustainable cultural tourism component, which was presented during the meeting.

The introduction of the heritage focus of the project was followed by Vladimir Melnik presenting a review of the many yet unrecorded archaeological sites on Soqotra, which will also be integrated into the project.

Dr Petr Vahalik and Dr Martin Rezejek from Mendel University in Brno, Czech Republic, presented the latest research on Soqotra with regards to mapping for conservation, and the importance of *Dracaena cinnabari*, the iconic dragon blood tree of Soqotra, as an important

nurse plant which stimulates other species to sprout under the protection of its canopy and fallen leaves.

This was followed by a presentation by Dr Uli Joger of the Staatliches Naturhistorisches Museum in Braunschweig, Germany, on the origin of Soqotra animals and their links to mainland faunas.

The afternoon included an update by Dr Kay Van Damme on the ongoing UNEP/GEF project on Soqotra (GEF ID #5347) implemented by EPA Soqotra, the Ministry of Water and Environment Yemen, and the Senckenberg Research Institute, Frankfurt, Germany. This project aims to integrate conservation and sustainable development on the Archipelago, and to present its online data repository in a form available to all (The Soqotra Conservation and Development Portal). The main components of the project consist of reducing threats of invasive species, land degradation and unsustainable land management while stimulating sustainable funding, capacity building, biodiversity conservation and protected areas management.

The presentation was followed by the Deputy Governor of Soqotra introducing his PhD study on the impacts of community-based ecotourism on attitudes towards conservation on the island.

The meeting in 2017 emphasized the ongoing role of FoS as an organisation in catalyzing discussions and ideas in a multidisciplinary international setting and in allowing an update of ongoing projects and research on Soqotra with links directly to people on the ground.

The conference programme concluded with two important sessions on conservation: one by Dr Eike Neubert on the status and the importance of IUCN Red Listing on Soqatra, and the second by Dr Haifaa Abdulhalim from the Arab Regional Centre for World Heritage in Bahrain on the TABE'A Programme on Soqatra. FoS and ARC-WH worked together this year to realise small-scale projects related to mitigating climate change impacts caused by the 2015 cyclone. These projects are initiated by Ismael Salem, who is one of the FoS representatives on the island. Dr Haifaa Abdulhalim and Ismael Salem (via Skype from Bahrain) presented one of these joint projects: the realisation of a vegetation regeneration plot in Momi Plateau on Soqatra, and other projects such as reparations due to damages caused by khareefs [strong monsoon winds].

The day concluded with a two hour roundtable discussion with the audience focused on Soqatra's cultural and natural heritage, present and future, and on sustainable development on the Archipelago. The discussion emphasized the needs and importance of the local communities on Soqatra, also voiced by the Deputy Governor, and discussed the current threats to culture and nature.

Sunday consisted of the Annual General Meeting and the selection of projects to be carried out by FoS in the coming year. The selected projects include distribution of information and awareness leaflets on plants, animals and culture, assistance to a disabled children project by training of Soqotri teachers, working with a British Council project on cultural heritage and with the UNEP/GEF project, and commitment to a formal agreement with ARC-WH to realise a joint mangrove restoration project on the northern coast.

ARC-WH kindly proposed to host the next FoS meeting in 2018 at their centre in Bahrain, which was unanimously agreed on. This will be the first meeting of the FoS in the Middle East, an initiative that was well received.

The meeting in 2017 emphasized the ongoing role of FoS as an organisation in catalyzing discussions and ideas in a multidisciplinary international setting and in allowing an update of ongoing projects and research on Soqatra with links directly to people on the ground.

Antonin Buček (1943-2018) – Obituary

Dr Hana Habrová, Mendel University Brno, Czech Republic

On 5th of March 2018 Associate Professor Antonín Buček (75), member of Friends of Soqotra since 2002, unexpectedly passed away.

Tony was among the first foreign visitors of Soqatra after the opening of the new airport in 1998, and the first one from Mendel University. Until his last visit in 2004 he spent many fruitful days on the island during his five stays, and from the first day there he fell in love with Soqotra's nature. Having experience in nature protection on the Caribbean islands, when he worked for the Institute of Geography of the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences, he began

thinking about possibilities of nature conservation and protection. As the author of our first project proposal, he suggested the idea of nature protection of unique local tree communities by establishing an ecological network through home garden activities. Being the author of our first articles about Soqotra's altitudinal vegetation zoning and plant communities, he inspired a lot of colleagues to continue the research. And us, decades younger, still wonder how he managed to tirelessly climb up the Hagher mountains with only a few breaks for cigarettes.

Let me honour his memory.



Rock art on Soqotra 1: Eriosh

Dr Julian Jansen van Rensburg, Soqotra Heritage Project & Freie Universitat Berlin

The rock art of Soqotra spans several millennia and includes an array of signs, symbols and inscriptions related to the island's rich and varied cultural and religious traditions, as well as its extensive overseas contacts. However, despite over two centuries of exploration and archaeological surveys rock art remains one of the most neglected areas of study on Soqotra, with only three of the eight known rock art sites having been comprehensively recorded. Unfortunately, this situation is exacerbated by development works that have and continue to threaten rock art sites on Soqotra.

The first site in this rock art series will focus on Eriosh, the best known petroglyph site on Soqotra. Spanning an area of approximately 7025 square metres, Eriosh is the largest of the known rock art sites on Soqotra. As impressive as this sounds it is only two-thirds of its original size, the remaining third having being destroyed during road construction.

The first person to discover Eriosh was Lieutenant Wellsted, who visited the island in 1834 and remarked on how strikingly it resembles sites he had found on the coasts of western Arabia. The petroglyphs he described included a script he believed was Ethiopic,

figures of men, camels, crosses and feet that appeared, 'as if a soft rock had yielded to their weight' (Wellsted 1840). In 1899 Eriosh was visited by Mabel and Theodore Bent, who undertook an archaeological survey of Soqotra (Bent and Bent 1900). They remarked that the various carvings of men, animal, feet and crosses were similar to those they had seen in Aksum, Ethiopia. Importantly, they also copied several inscriptions, thereby creating the first drawn record of some of the petroglyphs found. The importance of this is that despite many subsequent expeditions having visited the site, few have recorded any of the petroglyphs. Indeed, at present only about 1% of the petroglyphs have ever been recorded. This was first recognised by the author in 2002 when he visited the site, and while some attempts were made to create a photographic record of the site (Jansen van Rensburg 2016), it remains poorly documented.

Fortunately, with the British Council Cultural Protection Fund project known as the Soqotra Heritage Project, there is now a dedicated Soqotri cultural heritage team that, together with their other duties, are beginning with the very laborious task of documenting all of the remaining petroglyphs at Eriosh - a task that is all the more urgent as increasing development works begin to encroach on this hugely important site.

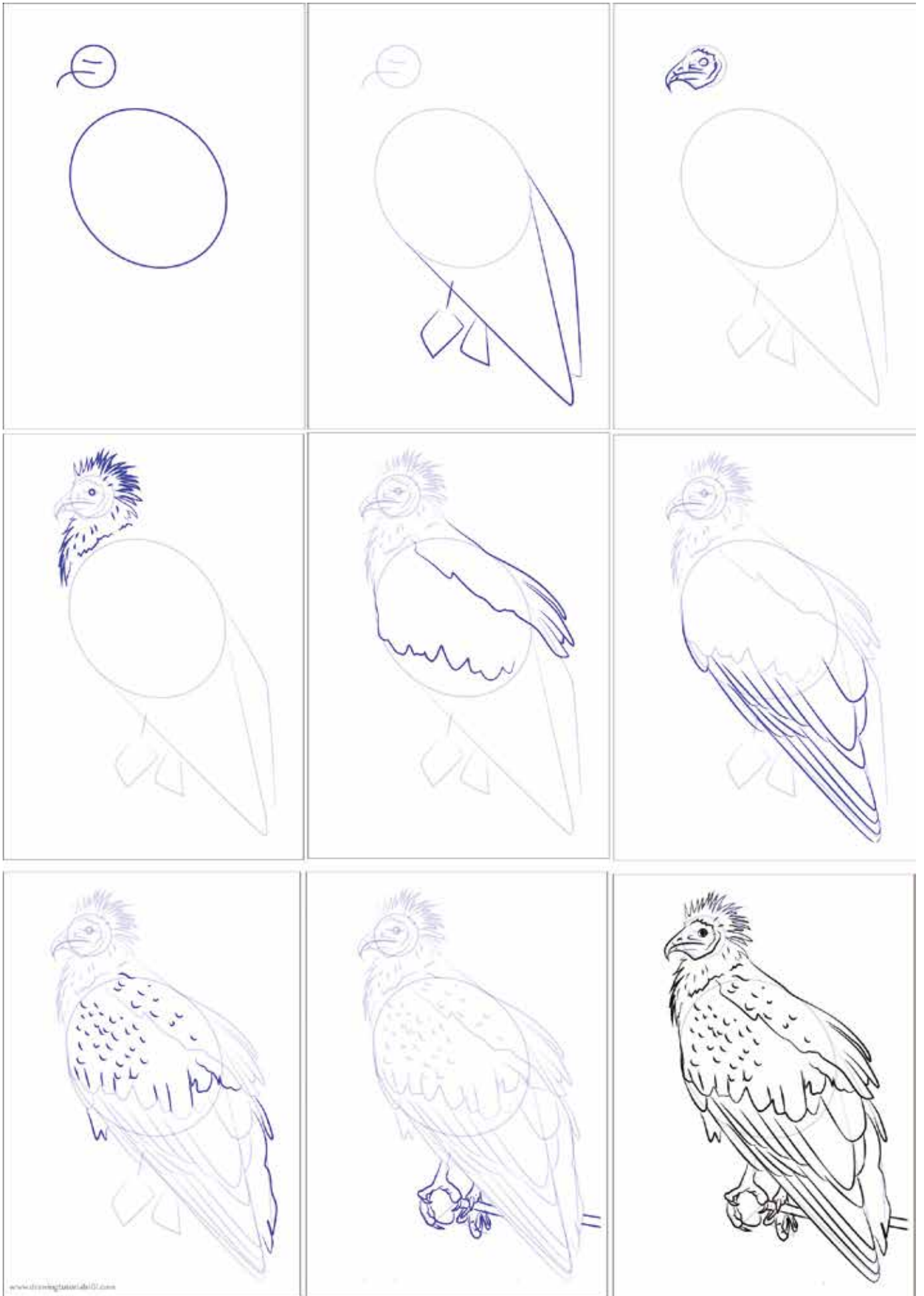
International Vulture and Bird of Prey Day on Soqotra

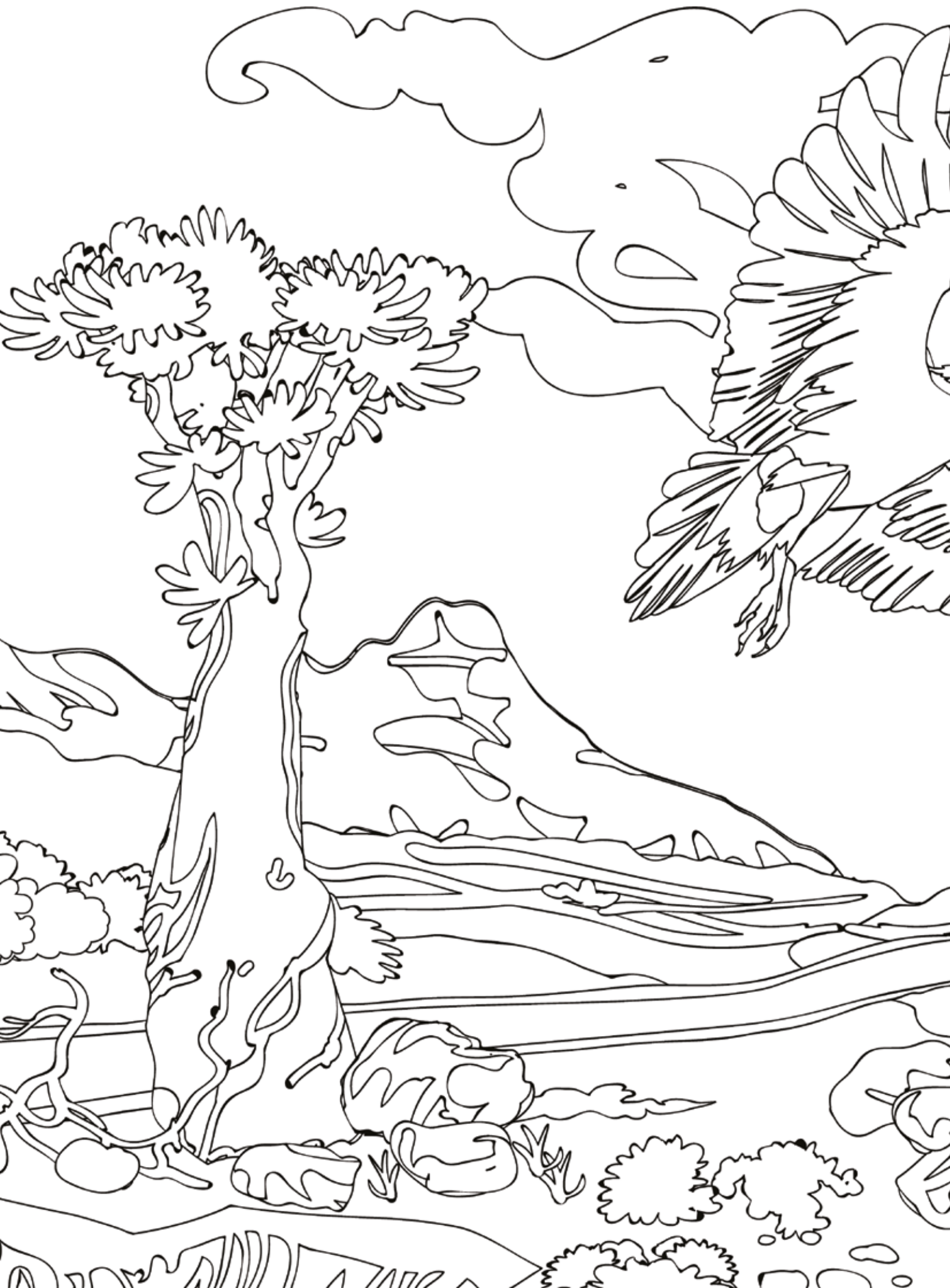
Ali Yahya, Ahmed Saeed and Richard Porter

Each year, the first Saturday in September is International Vulture Awareness Day. In September 2018, a special event in Soqotra is planned by the GEF/UNEP project staff and EPA Soqotra, together with BirdLife International and funded by OSME (the Ornithological Society of the Middle East), with contribution by FoS. Based on an initiative by Richard Porter, Ali Yahya (Awareness Officer) and Ahmed Saeed Suleiman (Exotic Species/IAS Expert) of the Soqotra UNEP/GEF project (ID #5347) have submitted a grant application to OSME for co-funding of this important awareness event, which has been awarded! Richard Porter: *"The Soqotran population of Egyptian Vultures (Soqotra's only vulture) is not threatened, but it is probably the largest concentration in the world (over 2,000 birds). It is important that the Soqotran people are aware of their responsibility for ensuring its future protection. The day will be aimed at the vulture and at Soqotran Bird of Prey, which include the endemic Soqotran Buzzard. Through such activities, Soqotra is actively taking part in helping the Egyptian Vulture and birds of prey through local awareness, and setting an example for international conservation."* More info on International Vulture Awareness Day at www.vultureday.org

Especially for Vulture Awareness Day on Soqotra, FoS was kindly granted the free use of a beautiful vector artwork (for colouring) for reprint in Tayf, entitled "Vulture on the Soqotran Plateaus" by the female Russian freelance artist and illustrator AnaitSmi (YouTube:ToonTells).

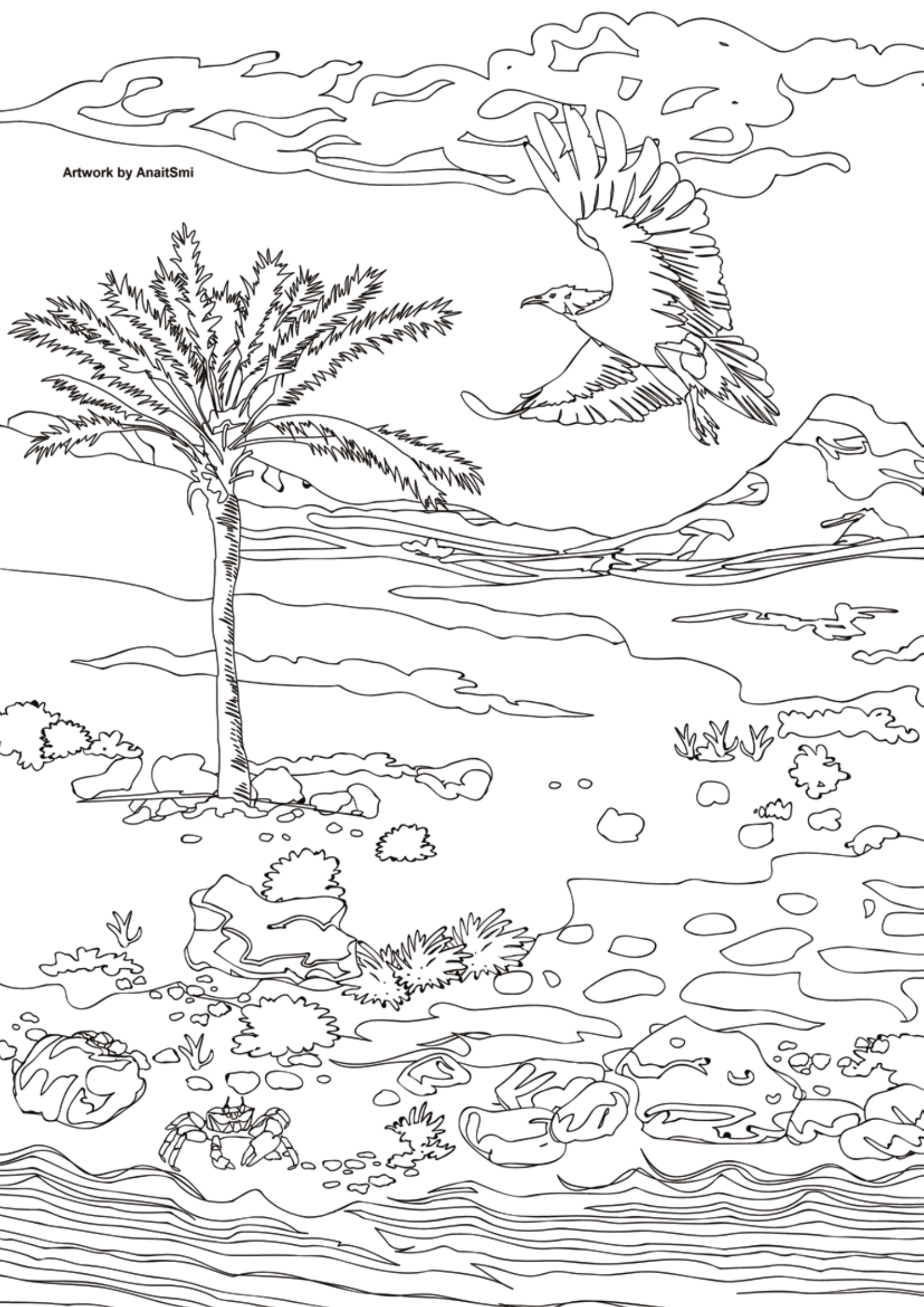








Artwork by AnaitSmi



Surviving starvation in a time of drought: land snails and cast nets



Miranda Morris

There are various types of land snail on the island. In earlier, hungrier times, many of these were eaten, though islanders can be reluctant to admit to this, and are rather shocked when told that many of us in Europe also eat snails, and by choice. The most popular, presumably because the most filling, were the large, round ones (genus *Socotora*), though the much smaller, pointed ones (genus *Riebeckia*), were also eaten. These last were

especially common among the zidīra plants (various *Indigofera* species such as *I. pseudo-intricata* and *I. marmorata*, and also *Campylanthus spinosus*) that grew in coastal areas. After even the lightest rains, bags full of snails could be gathered. Land snails were either cooked in water, or in areas where water was scarce, in the embers of the fire. They were a crucial source of survival food in many parts of Soqoṭra, as these poems show.

Notes

ṣəhəṣəḥ, 'small, pointed land snails; snail shells' (strings of which were threaded together and used to entertain and distract the very young).

fīlīhən (*singular* fīlānə), 'the larger edible land snails'.
ḳowḳəhētīn (*singular* ḳuwḳā), 'goats with neat small ears'.

lūlhētīn, *literally* 'pearls' (i.e. precious things).

məlāgəhəm, 'the pens where the kids are kept while the mother goats are taken off to pasture'.

rəhərəḥe, 'to work quickly' (a verb widely used to describe the scuttling of the *Scolapendra* giant centipede, *di-hāṣəhan*).

I-āḥmud ṣānkən ṣəhəṣəḥ / fīlīhən libinītin	May I stand between you and any hurt, small, pointed land snails / Edible land snails so white.
di-kīnkən ḳowḳəhētīn (or lūlhētīn) / ṣīsug I-əməlāgəhəm	Thanks to you, my small-eared goats (or my precious goats) / Still cluster around the kid pens.
wə-rəhərəḥe ʔīməhel / tiḳéfə ʔifirītin	And my right hand still moves busily about its work / With all the nails present and correct.

In another version, it is the cast-net rather than the land snails that the poet thanks for seeing him through the hungry months.

I-āḥmud ṣānkən ṣinnītin / di-tīhən di-ṣgārītin	May I stand between you and any hurt, small-meshed nets / Of finely-knotted strands!
il yəbāṣar ṣānkən bāṣkən / bə-līləhe wə-yəṣābaḥ	With which your owner leaves, setting off at night / And is still to be found (hard at work) when the sun rises the next morning.
ol yəḳóṣ w-ol yəxóṣe / w-ol guwdəm ʔīməhel	He does not have to give (livestock) in compensation (for thieving), nor does he commit a sin (i.e. theft) / Nor is his right hand cut off in punishment (for repeated theft).

Notes

ṣinnītin, ṣīnhītīn, (*singular* ṣīni, ṣīnhən), 'small cotton cast-net of a fine mesh'.

ṣgārītin (*singular* ṣgéro), 'holes, the mesh (of a net)'.

guwdəm, *passive* of /gdm/, 'to lop, to chop off' (the right hand of a persistent and unrepentant thief was cut off at the wrist in a public ceremony; the stump was treated with boiling shark-liver oil and the hand was hung up in a public place to deter others).

See also:

I-āḥmud ṣānkən ṣīnhītīn / tīhən ṣgārīhītīn	May I stand between you and any hurt, small-meshed nets / Finely-knotted strands!
il yəbṣārkən bāṣkən / bə-līləhe wə-yəṣābaḥ yəṣābaḥ	Which your owner takes off at night, / Works through the night and by morning his belly is full.
ol yəḳóṣ w-ol yəxóṣir / w-ol guwdəm ʔīməhel	He does not have to give (livestock) in compensation (for thieving), nor beg from others what they cannot give, / Nor is his right hand cut off.
Or:	
ol nuwṭa w-ol yəxētē / w-ol guwdəm ʔīmāle	He is not suspected of a crime, nor does he commit a sin, / Nor is his right hand cut off

Notes

yəxóṣir, 'to cause someone distress by asking for something which he cannot give; to cause oneself pain by being forced to refuse a request'.

ʔīmāle, another form of ʔīməhel, the right (hand).

nuwṭa, *passive* of /ntyl/, 'to suspect or accuse someone of a crime'.

Awareness campaign and community engagement in “No Plastic Day” activity at Qalansiyah Town, Soqatra

**Abdullateef Saad,
Ali Yahya and Haifa Baziyad,
UNEP-GEF Project Team**

The main objective of the UNEP-GEF Soqatra Project # 5347 is to prevent the irreversible loss of the unique ecosystems, biodiversity and natural resources of the Soqatra World Heritage Site. In this context, and to draw attention of the Qalansiyah community to the negative impact of plastics to the environment, a “No Plastic Day” campaign was implemented on 21 April 2018 at the Saif bin thi Yazan Primary School where education presentations, video clips and training activities were delivered by the UNEP-GEF project team members.



Photograph: participants at the end of the No Plastic Day event.

The campaign coincided with the inauguration of installing the new Qalansiyah dumpsite gate, which was funded by the project. It is worth mentioning that the Soqatra Deputy Governor and a number of high ranking

officials joined the team members, several volunteer teachers, and more than twenty school children of both genders, in clearing the school yard and the dumpsite surroundings of plastics and other waste.

**Dr Dana Pietsch, University of
Tubingen, Germany**

Soil is – with water – one of the main basic resources of life. In regions where soil is rare and agricultural resources are little, soil erosion is especially a big problem. On the first view, soil erosion on Soqatra Island would seem to be a minor problem. This appraisal is based on the fact that on the one hand the island is poor in soil resources, and on the other hand research on the island has mostly focussed on biodiversity.

Soil and land degradation on Soqatra Island – to remind a big challenge

However, results of soil investigations on Soqatra showed that for example in the Homhil Protected Area, land degradation in terms of erosion due to soil structure deterioration and humus loss has increased drastically: within three years a loss of about 40m³ in a

single gully head was estimated. In the south west, in Degerah (see picture), the problem is even worse, since there is less vegetation and less rainfall. Soil loss inevitably involves uprooting of trees and a decrease in soil fauna.

These problems are mainly to changes in many sectors of the economy, and also due to changing patterns of land-use. Signs of such changes are neglected home gardens, degraded areas due to overgrazing, eroded and salty top soils in areas of intensive wood cutting.

Recognising that more and more initiatives go back to soil conservation based on both modern and ancient practice, the movement to conserve soils - especially in these difficult times due to the lack of food and gas during the conflict in Yemen - should be encouraged by mentioning that there are successful examples of soil amelioration and food production on Soqatra Island.





Photo: H.E. Sheikh Khalifa Bin Ahmed Alkhalifa on Soqatra Island during a mission of ARC-WH. Photo credit:H. Abdulhalim, 2013.

H.E. Sheikh Khalifa Bin Ahmed Al Khalifa, New Honorary Member of Friends of Soqotra

With great honour, in July 2018 FoS welcomed H.E. Sheikh Khalifa Bin Ahmed Al Khalifa, Director of Museums and Antiquities at the Bahrain Authority for Culture & Antiquities (BACA), as Honorary Member. Sheikh Khalifa Bin Ahmed Al Khalifa holds a Master of Arts in Museum Anthropology from Columbia University in the United States

of America (2015), Master of Science in Sustainable Development from University College London in the United Kingdom (2010), and a Bachelor of Science in Marine Biology from Griffith University in Australia (2007). He started his career at the Public Commission for the Protection of Marine Resources, Environment and Wildlife in 2008, followed by an appointment at the Ministry of Culture

in 2011 joining the team working on "*Pearling: Testimony of an island economy*". He was also designated as the National Focal Point for the World Heritage Convention, and in 2013 he was appointed Assistant Director at the Arab Regional Centre for World Heritage where he currently holds an advisory function. As an active marine biologist with an academic background and broad experience in the conservation and sustainable development of cultural and natural heritage, Sheikh Khalifa has a keen interest in Soqotra's unique biodiversity and culture. We are delighted to welcome a strong advocate of the diverse cultural and natural values in the Arab World to FoS.

Bahrain Authority for Culture and Antiquities: <http://culture.gov.bh/en/authority/>

The Arab Regional Centre for World Heritage: <http://www.arcwh.org/>

Photo: H.E. Sheikh Khalifa Bin Ahmed Al Khalifa, welcomed as Honorary Member by FoS Chairperson Dr Kay Van Damme, at the Arab Regional Centre for World Heritage (ARC-WH), Manama, Bahrain, July 5th, 2018.

Photo credit: H. Abdulhalim.



Douglas Botting (1934 – 2018) – Obituary

Miranda Morris

Douglas Botting, described in the obituary in *The Times* (February 24, 2018) as ‘writer, adventurer and film-maker’, died earlier this year, at the age of 83.

To those interested in Soqotra his was a well-known name. While reading English at Oxford University, he became a member of the Oxford University Exploration Club, and it was with their support that he started to raise funds from various scientific bodies to establish *The Oxford University Expedition to Soqotra*. Finally in 1956, accompanied by post-graduates Michael Gwynne, Richard Lister and Neil Orr, the undergraduate John Weakley, and Peter Shinnie (who had recently been working as Director of Antiquities in the Sudan), the 22 year old Douglas set off for Soqotra. They stayed on the island for August and September of that summer monsoon, transport to and from the island being provided by the RAF stationed at Aden. The members of the expedition laboured to carry out the scientific research requested by their various sponsors: Shinnie carried out archaeological

surveys, other team members made limited collections of various plants and animals, while the medical students took blood samples and shared their basic stock of medicines with islanders. Some sound recordings were made for the London School of Oriental and African Studies, mainly by Peter Shinnie (the only member of the team to speak some Arabic). However, the expedition is chiefly remembered today, I think, for the very entertaining book that Douglas wrote about their trip: *Island of the Dragon’s Blood*. [Hodder and Stoughton 1958, with a new edition published in 2006, Steve Savage, printed by The Cromwell Press]. He also managed to make a short black and white film about their time on Soqotra.

37 years later, in 1993, Douglas returned to Soqotra for a month with Miranda Morris and the late Ahmad Sa’id Tahki - this time not during the summer monsoon. He had originally hoped to make another film to show the changes that had taken place since his last visit, but unfortunately this plan was never fully realised. In 2003 he attended the AGM of the Friends of Soqotra



held at Durham University, and showed his black and white film of the 1956 expedition. Much discussion followed, and it made for an interesting evening.

We continued to correspond sporadically and, until Alzheimers Disease overtook him in the last years of his life, he remained an active member of FoS and maintained his interest in the island. After his death, I sent his daughter, Kate, a copy of this photograph because he looks so happy in it, and she replied: “Thank you so much for the wonderful photo. Soqotra was such an important part of my father’s life.” I’m sure all Friends of Soqotra would wish to send their condolences to his family.

The British Library: cataloguing and digitising historic Soqotri sound files

Miranda Morris

As part of the *Unlocking Our Sound Heritage* project, funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund, the British Library is cataloguing and digitising material from the Thomas Muir Johnstone collection. This includes sound recordings made by Professor Johnstone during the 1967 *Joint Forces and Civilian Scientific Expedition to Soqotra*, but also recordings made during the 1956 *Oxford University Expedition to Soqotra* led by Douglas Botting.

I went to the British Library in March this year to work with the cataloguers on the recordings and to help identify the contents of the tapes. The collection consists of some ten reel-to-reel tapes: the recordings vary in length and the subject matter is diverse – from basic vocabulary to stories. The number of Soqotri speakers is very small however, with two men predominating.

Once catalogued and digitised, these recordings will be freely available online

to anyone who wishes to listen to them. Details of how to access them will be given on the Friends of Soqotra website when the process has been completed.

The British Library collection guide page is <https://www.bl.uk/collection-guides/world-and-traditional-music>. The ‘Unlocking our Sound Heritage’ page is <https://www.bl.uk/projects/unlocking-our-sound-heritage?ga=2.6005555.1681294225.1525339450-556382056.1508226642>



New scientific studies and discoveries on Soqotra

Dr Kay van Damme

In 2017, at least 40 studies related to Soqotra appeared in the scientific world. Such papers include descriptions of new species and add to our knowledge of the biodiversity of our favorite World Heritage Site, sometimes with notes on conservation. Yet also other interesting studies appeared in biology, conservation and archaeology. Please note that many members of FoS have co-authored these publications, keeping the flag up for international awareness by carrying out important studies on the cultural and natural heritage of Soqotra. We hope that in 2018, some of the scientific publications will have Soqotri authors among them as well. Below is a selection of the new publications.

New studies in biodiversity, especially insects

Mainly carried out by many researchers from the Czech Republic, we now know of an extra 4 new genera, 33 new species and 2 new subspecies among Soqotran animals, plants and fungi...!

Studies in taxonomy and genetics assess animal or plant specimens in relation to others and allow researchers to examine if the specimens they examine are new to science, or if they belong to a species that has been described before. On Soqotra, many species are only found on the islands and quite often in only one area in one island, and they are not found anywhere else.

These are the "endemics", and they add to the high biological importance and uniqueness of the archipelago.

Most new species described in 2017 belong to the diverse world of insects, in particular beetles. Indeed, beetles are among the most species-rich insect groups in the world, and this is also true on Soqotra. Bezdek &

Hajek (2017) reviewed literature on all the insects ever described from Soqotra and carefully counted 1,564 species across all groups, including many of the new ones found in 2017. Of course, the numbers change all the time with

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each new record or new species. For example, a new record of a yellow butterfly *Eurema brigitta* (The Small Grass Yellow) on Soqotra by Faltynek et al. (2017) brings the total number of butterflies on

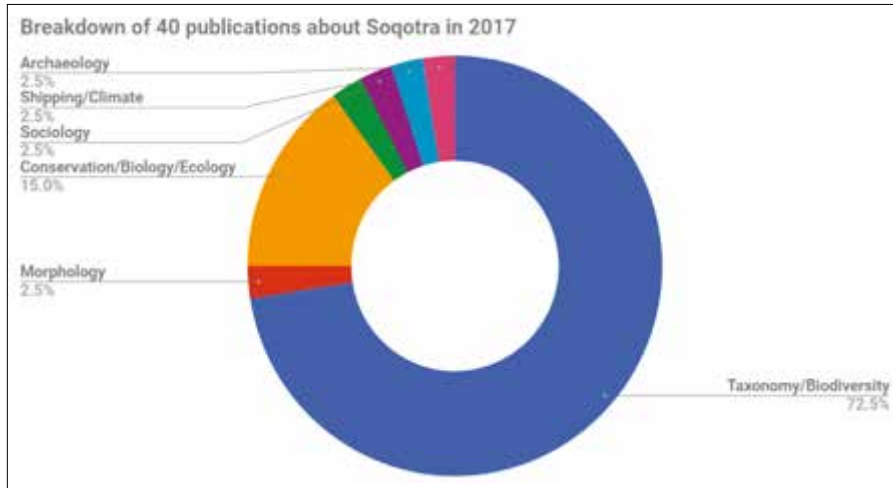
Soqotra to 27 species. Bezdek & Hajek (2017) also state that 540 of all 1,564 insect species on Soqotra are beetles (the largest group), with about 57% endemic to Soqotra - in other words, 57% of all beetle species on Soqotra are not found anywhere else in the world. The authors estimate that 42% of all currently known insect species on

Soqotra are endemic. Even at the higher taxonomical levels, an impressive total of 62 insect genera and 5 subgenera are considered to be endemic.

Two studies have looked into the Hymenoptera from Soqotra, which comprises the wasps, ants (Sharaf et al., 2017) and bees (Straka et al., 2017). Straka et al. (2017) review the Soqotri bees, and conclude that 17 out of 28 species (61%) are endemic to the island. The authors describe four new species of bees, some with names that indicate the connection they have in the cosystem to the plants they were found on: *Lasioglossum boswelliae* and *L. dracaenae*, two new names for beautiful bees that pollinate Soqotra's famous trees.

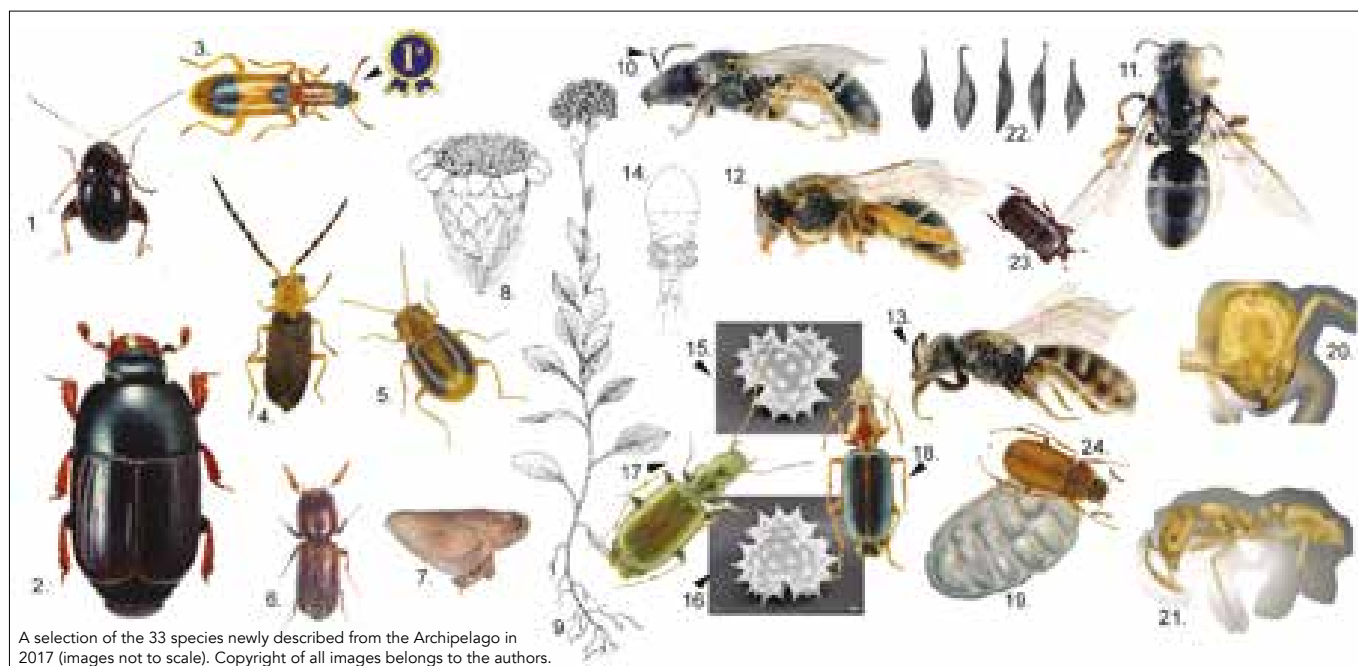
Sharaf et al. (2017) produced a most comprehensive overview of all the ant species on the Archipelago with beautiful images, and describe one new endemic species. However, the authors warn about the 10 invasive ant species on Soqotra, and how they have recently been introduced through the port and along the roads, and how they have strongly spread, along the roads, in comparison to a study in 2004. As the authors point out, invasive ants can destroy local fauna and they can also destroy local plant species. These invasive ants spread easily with litter, so it is important to keep nature and roadsides free from rubbish.

Some insects are very small. Świerczewski et al. (2017) described a tiny new genus of planthoppers



with only one species from Soqotra. Planthoppers are tiny insects, named such because they often "hop" on the plants on which they feed. They mostly resemble the plants on which they live, a strategy to avoid predators named "mimicry". But even the smallest animal, like the little planthopper, plays a role in the ecosystem. The new planthopper genus is named *Haloflata* ("halo" in Greek refers salt) and is found only on *Arthrocnenum* (Soqotri = *qalqiha*) shrubs in coastal saltmarshes and fragments of mangrove stands in the Shu'ab Nature Sanctuary. This shows the importance to biodiversity of the small remaining patches of mangrove on the island, which have suffered heavily from the cyclones in 2015 and from cutting. This new little animal (just a few millimeters long) illustrates how important it is that these mangroves are protected.

Animals even smaller than insects were described this year from Soqotra. Some animals are so small they can only be seen through a microscope. One of them is *Thalamocyclops*, a new genus of micro-crustaceans belonging to a group called copepods (Fiers & Van Damme, 2017). Copepods are very important as part of the marine and freshwater zooplankton that forms an important part of all young fish diets, and therefore supporting important fisheries. Without zooplankton there would be no fish in the sea. However, these new copepods were not found in the ocean but high up in Diksam, in water inside rockholes in the limestone, home to another but bigger crustacean, the large endemic Soqotran crabs (*Soqotra pseudocardisoma*). The small copepods, less than a tenth of a millimeter, are named after these rockholes, because "thalamos" means "in a closed room"



in Greek. Because they do not come out much, they have special features such as reduced eyes, typical for cave species that live inside karstic limestone. This is one of the many tiny animals that are hidden in water in the karst on Soqotra. For this tiny animal, a small rockhole is like a huge cave, bigger than Hoq! Therefore the copepod does not mind sharing it with its far and big relative, the crab.

But that is not even the smallest endemic described recently. At the basis of the terrestrial foodchain are microscopic bacteria, protozoans, algae and fungi, and even those have endemics on Soqotra! Van Den Broeck et al. (2017) describe the spores and the larger fruit bodies of new Ascomycetes ("sac fungi") growing on soil in Soqotra (they look like dark patches of soil actually). Ascomycetes are famous because of the discovery of *Penicillium*, which has led to the discovery of penicillin as an antibiotic. Such discoveries of new fungi and plants on Soqotra may lead to discoveries in interesting chemicals that these organisms produce. Madera et al. (2017) found at least 23 unknown chemical compounds in frankincense and myrrh trees from Soqotra.

Among the new plants, researchers from several institutes used genetics and morphological traits (leaves, flowers, pollen) to describe a new Soqotran genus and five new species of Asteraceae creating the new genus *Libinhania* to separate several species from *Helichrysum*. The new species have very nice names, such as *L. nivea* from Samha ("nivea": "snow white" for the flowers), *L. pendula* from cliffs in Soqotra ("pendula": "hanging"), or *L. fontinalis* from the spring at Noged ("fontinalis": "spring"). In addition, Czech researchers (Repka et al., 2017) named a new sedge species from the Hagher Mountains called *Carex Soqotrana*. Because sedges like wet areas, the authors found only two populations and these plants were rarely seen before. These new discoveries illustrate the importance of continued taxonomic work in the plants of Soqotra and the benefits of different universities working together on Soqotran collections to help conservation. New



things may still be discovered in such a rich, important and well-studied group as plants.

Ecology, Biology and Conservation

About 15% of the papers in 2017 are on conservation, biology and ecology, the second largest topic under which papers appear about Soqotra. *Dracaena* (Soqotri = *a'arhiyib*) is the single most studied plant species of Soqotra in 2017.

In a two-year experiment on *Dracaena cinnabari*, Hubalkova et al. (2017) followed the growth of seeds from Firmihin and Skand under the same conditions, with abundant water (100 seedlings from each locality). It took only four to ten weeks for the seedlings to germinate, and after two years, the plants were already 25cm tall! The authors tended to the little plants very well so the survival was high, yet the seedlings from Firmihin seemed a little stronger (90% survived) than those from Skand (78%). One interesting difference noted by the team was that the plants from Firmihin had more leaves and those

from Skand less but longer leaves. These are small differences in these populations which show that each may have unique features. Such studies are very important to save the *Dracaena* from extinction, because the conditions on Soqotra are very tough for seedlings, as shown by Habrova and Pavlis (2017). They looked at the regeneration in nature of *Dracaena* over five years in a fenced plot of about 1000m² in Firmihin. No seedlings of *Dracaena* germinated of the seeds that were sown in this plot, but outplanted seedlings survived. The authors suggest that the species grows best in nature when there is enough

humus and humidity for at least a few days. Besides *Dracaena*, a total of 49 plant species appeared in the plot, including 23 endemics, together with a dense grass cover! Such studies

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illustrate the impact that grazing on Soqotra has on the vegetation and on the regeneration of trees, and that vegetation restoration, especially of woody plants, requires close monitoring and care to allow survival of these species.

If we would plant a new *Dracaena* tree today, we would have to wait

nearly a hundred years for it to become an adult and flower. At that point, the survival will depend on the pollination by other species that live in association, and which we should protect also today for the future of the entire ecosystems. In the world of reptiles and dragon's blood trees, Garcia & Vasconcelos (2017) published a paper in the *Journal of Nature Conservation*, called "The beauty and the beast". The authors caught about 30 gecko specimens by hand and swabbed their snouts with a little glycerine-jelly cube stained with a red dye called fuchsine - to color the plant pollen. Then they released the geckos, and back in the laboratory the researchers investigated the samples under the microscope. There they discovered that *Dracaena cinnabari* pollen is sticking to the snouts of these nocturnal geckos ("the beasts"), in addition to other unidentified pollen, suggesting that these animals may help pollinate the trees ("the beauty") and other plants. Reptiles are often seen in a negative way on Soqotra, but they are really important to help the survival of rare plant species such as the *Dracaena*! Perhaps the gecko does not produce honey like the popular honeybee, but to the tree they are just as important. In a parallel dietary study, Martin et al. (2017) show that the diet preferences of Soqotran geckos can really differ between species and that they eat more than pollen alone of course.

Invasive species

Besides the invasive ant species newly discovered on Soqotra mentioned earlier, efforts have been made in 2017 to list all the existing exotic species on Soqotra, both plants and animals. The checklist is published by the Invasive Species Specialist Group ISSG of IUCN, and appears on the GBIF portal (www.gbif.org), a global database for the world's biodiversity. Several such lists were compiled under an initiative led by Shyama Pagad who published an overview in *Scientific Data* (Pagad et al., 2017: *Introducing*



the *Global Register of Introduced and Invasive Species*). The complete Soqotra dataset, with contributions by many specialists, contains no less than 122 species. Not all exotics are invasive of course, but it is good to have a list to prioritize the species that should be managed or controlled to avoid effects on biodiversity.

Cultural heritage

In a study on the cultural heritage of Soqotra in the *Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies*, Jansen van Rensburg & Hopper (2017) use remote sensing of satellite imagery in combination with ecological, archaeological and historical data to examine the walls on Soqotra. Detailed tracing of the walls was carried out by another FoS-member, D. Van Dorpe, a very intensive process, allowing the basis for this study. Three categories are recognized: 1. Enclosures, 2. Walls related to water features and 3. Field systems and trackways (often with double walls). The authors state that these walls may have functioned most likely in the past for the production of incense, dragon's blood and aloes. However, the function may have been more diverse, and the walls could have served to allow retention of soils and water, allowing intense agriculture. The date of when the walls were built and used remains a mystery.

Other subjects

Hubalkova et al. (2017b) examined the structure of wood at the cellular level in *Dracaena cinnabari* and discuss the adaptations to sub-tropical climates and harsh droughts. Looking even closer, Madera et al. (2017) examine Soqotran *Boswellia* and *Commiphora* resins (frankincense and myrrh) at the chemical level, finding 103 volatile compounds, of which 23 were unidentified. This illustrates the potential to discover new chemical compounds in Soqotran endemic plants!

A Chinese study by Chen et al. (2017) looked into data on shipping and examined the routes passing Soqotra. In comparison to the South China Sea, the authors discuss how the monsoons in the Arabian Sea affect the shipping routes, causing ships to detour from the southern to the northern side of Soqotra because of the dangerous currents. Perhaps they could have best asked a Soqotri fisherman. In thousands of years of shipping around Soqotra, not much has changed: the seas are still as tricky as ever!

Nonn et al. (2017) examined the oceanic phase of the rifting of the eastern Gulf of Aden on Soqotra and the separation from Southern Oman in the Oligocene-Miocene and the formation of oceanic crust between Southern Arabia and Soqotra around 17.6 million years ago.

Two new species of bristle worms (Polychaeta) of the genus *Branchiosyllis* were described by Rodríguez et al. (2017). The only new species in the marine world described from Soqotra in 2017, still from old collections. For sure there are more!

Not all exotics are invasive of course, but it is good to have a list to prioritize the species that should be managed or controlled to avoid effects on biodiversity.

Contact Information

Friends of Soqatra

Friends of Soqatra (UK Charity Number 1097546) was formed in 2001. Its distinctive rationale is to bring together people with backgrounds in scientific research and those with a more general interest and develops the synergies between them in order to:

- Promote the sustainable use and conservation of the natural environment of the Soqatra island group
- Raise awareness of the archipelago's biodiversity and the unique culture and language of the islanders
- Help improve the quality of life of the island communities and support their traditional land management practices



Contact Friends of Soqatra

info@friendsofsoqatra.org
<https://www.facebook.com/FriendsOfSoqatra>

Secretary (General Correspondence):

Dr Julian Jansen Van Rensburg
fos.secretary@gmail.com

Chairperson:

Dr Kay Van Damme
Kay.VanDamme@gmail.com

Officers and Executive Committee:

■ Chairperson:

Dr Kay Van Damme
Kay.VanDamme@gmail.com

■ Vice-Chairperson and Secretary:

Dr Julian Jansen Van Rensburg
jansenvanrensburg.julian@gmail.com

■ Honorary Chairperson:

Dr Miranda Morris
miranda@mirandamorris.com

■ Membership Secretary and Treasurer:

Dr Sabina Knees
SKnees@rbge.org.uk

■ Communications Officer:

Lisa Banfield
lisabanfield@gmail.com

■ Website Manager:

Dr Dana Pietsch
dana.pietsch@unitubingen.de

■ Executive Committee (all above officers plus):

Fabio Attorre,
Salwa Barkwan,
Peter De Geest,
Hana Habrova,
Isam-Eldin Mohamed Ali,
Dirk Van Dorpe,
Vladimir Melnik,
Hugh Morris,
Raquel Vasconcelos

Regional Representatives:

■ Germany

Dr Dana Pietsch,
Tubingen, Germany
dana.pietsch@unitubingen.de

■ Oman

Issam Khamis Thabit Al Soqotri,
P.O. Box 766,
Area Code 211,
Governorate of Dhofar,
Sultanate of Oman
Telephone: 00 968 95485734

■ Gulf States

Shukri Nuh Abdullah Al-Harbi Di-Kishin,
P.O.Box 1590,
'Ajman, United Arab

■ Emirates

Telephone: 00 97150 5775678 or
00 97150 2320808

■ Soqatra

Ismael Mohammed, local coordinator
TABE'A and joint Friends of Soqatra/
Arab Regional Centre for World
Heritage projects.
i.salem@arcwh.org

Tayf

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If you would like to include an article, research note or notice in future issues please send to Tayf editors at: tayf.fos@gmail.com

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Articles without named authors prepared by the editors and/or FoS Committee.

Friends of Soqatra Website

<http://www.friendsofsoqatra.org>

The Friends of Soqatra website is managed by Dana Pietsch. It provides information on completed and ongoing scientific research on the Soqatra Archipelago including data, bibliographies and contacts of institutions and research teams. The structure and layout also includes a page in the Arabic language which gives some general information about FoS. If you would like to submit content for the website, please contact:

dana.pietsch@unitubingen.de

