

SUPPLY CRISIS THREATENS BIODIVERSITY IN THE SOCOTRA ARCHIPELAGO

At the 14th annual meeting of Friends of Soqotra (FoS), which took place on September 13, 2015 at CIBIO-InBIO in Portugal, national and international experts called attention to the current and potential future impact that the political unrest in Yemen is having on the biodiversity of Socotra. The archipelago has been classified as a UNESCO World Heritage Site due to its exceptional biological and cultural value, which is now at risk.



Large amounts of wood for fuel are being collected and transported as a result of a months-long shortage of cooking gas on Socotra. Photograph by Ahmed Saeed Suleiman (August 2015)

Located in the Western Indian Ocean, the Socotra Archipelago was designated a Natural World Heritage Site (WHS) in 2008, because of its rich biodiversity and high number of threatened species, and is globally recognized for its outstanding cultural and biological value. As a Yemen Governorate, the future of its ca. 80,000 human inhabitants, as well as of hundreds of unique animal and plant species, is strongly and inevitably linked to events that take place on the mainland.

Consequences of the current political upheaval in Yemen, which is having devastating impacts on livelihoods on the mainland, have now reached Socotra, and are directly threatening the integrity of Arabia's largest insular WHS.

During the 14th Annual General Meeting of FoS, which was organized at CIBIO-InBIO (<http://cibio.up.pt/conferences/details/annual-general-meeting-of-the-fos>), a group of national and international experts gathered to discuss current and future impacts on the Socotra WHS, particularly concerning its unique biodiversity. The meeting concluded with the specialists unanimously expressing grave concerns about the short- and long-term impacts of the current situation on the Archipelago, and pointing out the need to raise international attention to the subject.

In particular, the reduced fuel and gas supply from the mainland during the last few months, as well as the absence of regular flights, have not only resulted in greater isolation of Socotra, and brought about severe consequences to its economy and human welfare, but have also threatened the conservation of biodiversity. In addition to the loss of income from ecotourism, an important source of revenue for the islanders, and reduced access to health services on the mainland, the current situation is leading to a direct increase of unsustainable use of local resources.

According to Abdulrageb Al-Okaishi & Ahmed Saeed Suleiman, from the United Nations Development Programme and the Socotra Environmental Protection Authority (EPA), respectively, “because of gas shortage, live trees are being increasingly cut, posing serious threats to important species unique to the island (e.g., *Croton socotranus* and the Vulnerable *Cephalocroton socotranus*)”. EPA estimates that each person can consume up to 60 trees/year, which is above the carrying capacity of the current ecosystem. Such impacts are well known to lead to soil erosion, land degradation and habitat decline, with a direct loss of insular biodiversity as a result. International awareness and consequent help is needed to minimise the shortage of fuel and gas and to thereby help avoid an imminent ecological disaster. The long-term environmental effects, as well as the impacts on human livelihoods through a loss of ecosystem services, are considered as direct threats to the integrity of an Archipelago situated in a globally recognized biodiversity hotspot.



Experts belonging to over 12 different nationalities, engaged in research on the Socotra Archipelago, at the FoS meeting, Porto. Image credit: CIBIO-INBio, 2015

FoS, representing more than 12 nationalities at the meeting, hereby raises the issue to the attention of the international community and give voice to a concern of local inhabitants for the survival of their cultural and natural heritage in the Socotra Archipelago (www.friendsofsoqotra.org).

Socotra’s inhabitants and its unique biodiversity are silent victims of an ongoing conflict, indirectly affected by events that are more devastating on the mainland. FoS aims to speak for those easily forgotten and to press for the early resumption of flights and services to the Archipelago so that the integrity of the WHS can be safeguarded.

FURTHER CONTACTS/MORE INFORMATION

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<http://cibio.up.pt/conferences/details/annual-general-meeting-of-the-foS>