

# Zayed: Caring Environmentalist

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## Abstract

HH Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan, Ruler of Abu Dhabi and President of the United Arab Emirates, died on 2nd November 2004. Amidst his many achievements, he was an active protagonist for the conservation of wildlife and the environment and intensely keen to ensure the preservation of the heritage and history of his people. He was involved in promotion of these topics for well over half a century, commencing long before they became fashionable.

This paper focuses on his contribution as an individual, as well as a leader, to the conservation of the country's wildlife and heritage.

## Introduction

The death on 2nd November 2004 of HH Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan marked the end of an era in the United Arab Emirates. Sheikh Zayed had been President of the UAE since it was established in 1971, and had been involved in government since 1946, first as Ruler's Representative in the Eastern Region of Abu Dhabi, based in Al Ain, then, from 1966, as Ruler of Abu Dhabi emirate. His achievements in other spheres are outwith the scope of this paper, which will focus on his

lifelong and deep personal interest in the country's environment and heritage.

It has been noted by the Patron of the Emirates Natural History Group, Sheikh Nahayan bin Mubarak Al Nahayan, UAE Minister of Education, that Sheikh Zayed was an environmentalist long before it became fashionable to be one. His own recollections bear that out.

In a fragment of biography published a quarter of a century ago, Sheikh Zayed recalled the moment in his youth when he recognised the fact that the over-exploitation of natural resources could, and would, lead to the extinction of species.

*"One day I set out on a hunting expedition in open country. My game was a large herd of gazelles spread over a wide area. I followed them and began shooting. Three hours later, I stopped to count my bag, and found I had shot fourteen gazelle.*

*I pondered over this a long time. I realised that hunting with a gun was no more than an outright attack on animals, and a cause of their rapid extinction. I changed my mind, and decided to restrict myself to falconry only" (1).*

Sheikh Zayed was born into a world where the inter-relationship of Man and Nature was a crucial part of life itself. The time-honoured traditions of Bedu

nomadism and of the skills they involved of living off a harsh and demanding land were still the key to survival for many of the people of Abu Dhabi. Knowledge of where to find good pasture after rain, of how to find the scant water resources in the depth of the desert and of what plants and animals could provide medicines to cure ailments or food to supplement an always restricted diet was not merely useful. It was essential.

As a child, Sheikh Zayed loved riding and hunting while his lifelong fascination with the sport of falconry had already begun by the time he was eight years old (2).

Sheikh Zayed's knowledge of the environment around him led him to recognise the dangers posed by a non-sustainable exploitation of resources. He drew that insight from his knowledge of the traditional heritage of the people of the Emirates – whether dwellers in the deserts and mountains, or coastal-based fishermen and pearl-divers.

At the same time, however, Sheikh Zayed had a curiosity about scientific investigation that went well beyond a simple recognition of the need for conservation. He was interested both in ensuring the conservation of wildlife, and in learning about it.

One of the least-studied parts of the wildlife of the UAE is the bats, order chiroptera, whose nocturnal habits mean that the presence of the various species is often overlooked. Eight species of bats are now known to be present in the Emirates, and further studies may identify more.

*Taphozous nudiventris*, a species of sheath-tailed bat found in the Emirates, has amongst its described sub-species one, from the Al Ain area, that carries the scientific name of *zayidi*. The tale of how it came by its name provides an interesting insight into Sheikh Zayed's fascination with the process of scientific research.

The arrival in the mid-1930s of the first oil exploration teams, with their vehicles, had made it possible for areas of the desert and hinterland to be visited with relative ease. Sheikh Zayed himself had accompanied some of those teams, assigned by his eldest brother, then Ruler, Sheikh Shakhbut bin Sultan to ensure that they were able to travel freely wherever they wished. With the country beginning to open up, the first real studies of the country's flora and fauna began in the 1950s, often with logistic support provided by the holder of the onshore oil concession, the Iraq Petroleum Company, whose local subsidiary was Petroleum Development (Trucial Coast), later the Abu Dhabi Petroleum Company, ADPC, whose participants are still shareholders in the Abu Dhabi Company for Onshore Oil Operations, ADCO.

One of those early researchers was Dr. David Harrison, a specialist in Arabian mammals, who made several visits to the UAE. In 1954, Harrison visited the Al Ain area, and was invited to have dinner with Sheikh Zayed, then Ruler's Representative in Abu Dhabi's Eastern Region.

During the evening, Sheikh Zayed and Harrison were sitting out of doors, with Sheikh Zayed asking his visitor about his work that he was doing, and giving Harrison the benefit of his own knowledge of the country's wildlife. As they spoke, Harrison noted that a number of bats were flying around above them and mentioned that it would be of considerable use if he could obtain a specimen, to identify it, and to see if it was of a species, or a sub-species, not yet known to science.

Recalling their discussion over 45 years later, Harrison said that Sheikh Zayed promptly offered to get him one, called for a rifle, and, in a remarkable display of marksmanship, shot him a bat. It proved to be of a sub-species not previously known, and, in acknowledgement of Sheikh Zayed's role in procuring the specimen, Harrison gave the bat the Latin name of *Taphozous nudiventris zayidi*, and the popular name of Zayed's sheath-tailed bat (3). (Subsequently, *T.n. zayidi* has been shown to be intermediate with *T.n. nudiventris* and must be considered doubtfully valid)

In later years, Sheikh Zayed continued to display that personal interest in other ways. In the early 1960s, for example, aware that the Arabian oryx was on the verge of extinction in Oman, he arranged, just in time, for the capture of two breeding pairs for the nucleus of a captive-breeding programme.

Today, 40 years later, there are well over 2,000 Arabian oryx in captivity in the UAE, many on his own private nature reserve island of Sir Bani Yas, (along with hundreds of other endangered species like the Arabian gazelle and the scimitar-horned oryx) and a programme of exchange has been initiated with other collections worldwide in order to ensure the preservation of the different genetic strains of the species.

The recent establishment of an International Arabian Oryx Secretariat puts a final touch to the programme of the preservation of the species, and the choice of Abu Dhabi as the base of that Secretariat was a fitting recognition of the role played by Sheikh Zayed in those days, nearly four decades ago, when the survival of the species was in question.

In the late 1960s, when he became Ruler of Abu Dhabi, Sheikh Zayed created the Association for Animal Welfare, a group of rangers who patrolled – and still patrol – the deserts to ensure that there was no uncontrolled hunting. The gazelle and hare populations were immediate beneficiaries.

He continued also his own personal and active interest in falconry and conservation, not just as a participant, but as the source of numerous initiatives that have come, over the years, to have a far-reaching effect.

One was the 1st World Conference on Falconry and Conservation, held in Abu Dhabi at the end of 1976.

This, for the first time, brought falconers from North America, Europe and the Far East together with falconers from Arabia, the stronghold of the sport. It not only allowed the falconers to meet each other but also acted as a launch pad for a strategy devised by Sheikh Zayed to bring falconers into the mainstream of emerging conservation efforts.

It was at this time that captive-bred falcons from Europe first began to appear in Arabia, launching a trend that today sees most UAE falconers choosing captive-bred birds by preference.

At that conference, the promulgation of an Abu Dhabi Emiri decree was announced by Deputy Prime Minister Sheikh Sultan bin Zayed Al Nahyan which indicated that the President's interest in matters of conservation went far beyond falcons and their prey. The decree started the process of conserving the country's marine life by banning the use of explosives for fishing, a practice which had only recently begun to take place, and which was in complete contradiction with the traditional practices of sustainable harvesting of the food resources.

A few years later, on Sheikh Zayed's instructions,

the country's first Hunting Law was promulgated, providing protection to virtually all of the UAE's wildlife, with the exception of Socotra cormorants *Phalacrocorax nigrogularis*, excluded after heavy (and ill-informed) lobbying from fishermen who were concerned about the potential impact of the species of fish stocks (4).

The issuing of legislation and the establishing of new governmental structures, such as the National Avian Research Centre, in the early 1990s, followed by the Environmental Research and Wildlife Development Agency, ERWDA, later in the decade, is, of course, a function of Government, even if the personal views of leaders can prompt such decisions. Sheikh Zayed also showed in his own private actions, however, that his personal commitment to conservation was deep-rooted, an essential component of the way he looked upon the world around him.

One example is the way in which he has encouraged research into the ecology of falcons and the health of captive birds.

Sheikh Zayed was also amongst the first to discern the threats to wild populations and set in motion a variety of captive-breeding programmes for species related to falconry.

On his directives, for example, a Houbara Breeding Programme was launched at Al Ain Zoo in 1977, with the first successes in 1982. In 1989, the National Avian Research Centre, NARC, now part of ERWDA, began a breeding programme for the Asian houbara which, after a slow start, produced over 200 birds in 2004. The long-term objective, determined by Sheikh Zayed himself, is to produce substantial numbers of birds, most to be released to supplement wild stocks.

Like most responsible Arab falconers, Sheikh Zayed has long followed a practice of releasing many of his birds at the end of the hunting season. Just as the shooting of too many gazelles can endanger the survival of the animal in the wild, so can the capture of too many wild-bred falcons have a damaging effect on their species. The Zayed Falcon Release Programme, launched in 1995, and devoted to the release of wild-caught birds at the end of the falconry season, had, by 2004, seen nearly 1000 sakers and peregrines released in Pakistan and Central Asia during the peak of the spring migration. Satellite-tracking of some of the released birds indicate that some, at least, have re-integrated successfully with the wild populations.

Sheikh Zayed also moved both to ensure that wild-caught falcons lived longer in captivity, by establishing his own falcon hospital at Al Khazna, in 1985, which, by 1991, was treating nearly 3,000 birds a year. He followed this up by beginning to use captive-bred hybrids from 1993.

According to the former director of the Al Khazna hospital, Dr. Ken Riddle, "These hybrids were a phenomenal success and convinced H.H. Sheikh Zayed to concentrate his efforts on captive-raised hybrids from then on" (5).

Today, many of the initiatives on the environment and wildlife conservation made by Sheikh Zayed are enshrined in legislation, both Federal laws and Emiri decrees. In many other countries, the legislation is there, but the commitment is lacking and, as a result, conservation ranks fairly low down on the political agenda. That is, however, not the case in the UAE, where the President's personal interest ensured that conservation was, and remains, a high priority.

That personal interest was well displayed in his quick response to the identification of threats to two important sites for the UAE's bird life.

In the late 1980s, for example, increasing ease of access to the mangroves just to the east of Abu Dhabi island led to growing human disturbance. Members of the Emirates Natural History Group, who had already identified the area as being important for birds, drew this to the attention of the Group's Patron, Sheikh Nahayan bin Mubarak Al Nahayan, who then informed Sheikh Zayed. There was an immediate response. The police were ordered to patrol the area, while Sheikh Nahayan was instructed to visit the mangroves as soon as possible and to report back to Sheikh Zayed on whether Asian honeybees were building combs there. A muddy Friday morning outing by Sheikh Nahayan and one of the writers, PH, not only found honeybees (and breeding Western reef heron *Egretta gularis*), but produced a set of photographs of honeycombs that were duly shown to Sheikh Zayed the same evening.

In 1990, another message reached Sheikh Zayed, via the same route, from another ENHG member, the then Dutch Ambassador in the UAE, Willem Dolleman, a keen birdwatcher, who was concerned about the shooting that he had witnessed at an area then known as the Al Ghar Lakes, 40 km, outside Abu Dhabi on the truck road to Al Ain. The lakes, created by a damming of outflow from a neighbouring sewage plant, had emerged as a major site for wintering waterfowl, including several species of duck.

Once again, Sheikh Zayed responded, and police patrols were instituted. Later, in 1998, when greater flamingos *Phoenicopterus ruber* attempted, unsuccessfully, to breed at the site, following an approach by SA to the Deputy Chairman of ERWDA, Sheikh Hamdan bin Zayed Al Nahyan, who briefed the President, Sheikh Zayed ordered its formal protection of the site, which he requested be re-named the Al Wathba Lakes (6).

Today, managed by ERWDA, they are one of the most important wetland sites for birds anywhere in south-eastern Arabia and flamingos have now successfully raised their young here.

While he displayed an interest in conservation from an early age, Sheikh Zayed also showed a deep and abiding personal interest in the history and heritage of his country. He, of course, recognised the need for change, and worked to bring the benefits of modern development to the people of Abu Dhabi and the UAE as a whole. At the same time, however, he was always eager to advocate the necessity of preserving the fundamental traits of UAE society that have permitted its people to live in an environment where the harshness of nature itself has always made simple survival a challenge.

In one often-quoted statement, Sheikh Zayed said: "History is a continuous chain of events. The present is only an extension of the past. He who does not know his past cannot make the best of his present and future, for it is from the past that we learn. The new generation should have a proper appreciation of the role played by their forefathers" (7).

Sheikh Zayed learned of the ways of the people of the Emirates in his youth. As a boy, then as a young man, he imbibed the traditions and listened to the oral history of the tribesmen, the stories (half fact, half legend) which spoke of their origins and of the conflicts of the past.

Little of that is recorded in a sense that historians

would accept. There are few books that record the events, little in the way of the remains of monumental buildings to offer mute evidence of past civilisations and conflicts. Yet those tales and traditions heard in his youth must have sparked a desire in Sheikh Zayed's mind to know more of the past, for it is evident that he long had a curiosity to know more, and to contribute to the removal of the veil of ignorance that has concealed the heritage of the people of the Emirates.

Back in 1959, the arrival of a group of Danes to examine what appeared to constitute little more than piles of stones on a little island near Abu Dhabi must have seemed somewhat odd to Sheikh Zayed and his fellow citizens. Most Europeans who visited Abu Dhabi were British, and, with the exception of a few itinerant scientists like Dr. David Harrison, they were generally connected either with the oil industry or the British Government. This group, however, came from an unfamiliar country, Denmark, that had no traditional ties with the Gulf, and the Danes who arrived were clearly neither government men nor oil company employees.

The group was, of course, the first team of archaeologists ever to visit the Emirates, and the island was that of Umm al-Nar, where the team was beginning the process of uncovering the evidence of a previously unknown civilisation.

One of the leaders of the team was Geoffrey Bibby, (himself, as it happens, both British and a former employee of the Iraq Petroleum Company, the parent of Abu Dhabi's onshore oil concessionaire), who recorded later in his book 'Looking for Dilmun' how Sheikh Zayed displayed his interest in what they were doing.

Sheikh Zayed came out frequently to visit the team at Umm al-Nar, and asked hosts of questions about what they were doing, and the meaning of what they were finding in the massive collective tombs, more than four thousand years old. And, in the discussions, he tempted the archaeologists with stories of other mounds for them to examine.

*"If you want to see mounds like these in their hundreds," he said, "you should come to Al Ain" (8).*

The archaeologists took him up on his invitation, and visited Al Ain a few weeks later.

*"Zayed's boast of hundreds of mounds was not idle," Bibby wrote. "Around us on the ridge stood quite that number, and as our eyes accustomed themselves to the landscape, we could see mounds on every crag and crest and spur, all the way to Mount Hafit itself" (9).*

Fascinated by the discoveries of the archaeologists, and by the light they were shedding on the history of the Emirates, Sheikh Zayed urged Bibby and his colleagues to come and work at Al Ain, putting at their disposal some of the sparse resources then available to him. And, in a demonstration of his genuine interest in their work, he continued to suggest to them new areas in which they might look. One such suggestion, in 1962, was that they should examine a scattered heap of large stones in a desert area near the village of Hili. Bibby described the appearance of the site as *"a miniature Stonehenge, a rough circle of large stone slabs, most of them fallen but one still standing on edge."* (10)

The 'miniature Stonehenge' was, of course, the collapsed Hili Tomb, another site of major importance for the history and heritage of the Emirates. During its excavation and subsequent restoration, Sheikh Zayed displayed a deep personal interest and he was a

frequent visitor to observe the progress being made.

Subsequently, of course, the UAE has become one of the most active countries in Arabia in terms of archaeological investigations, with substantial investment being made by Government to facilitate the uncovering of the country's past.

Sheikh Zayed continued to maintain his personal interest in the topic of the country's heritage, extending not only to archaeology, but further back, too, to the study of palaeontology, the fossil record of millions of years ago.

During a visit to Jebel Dhanna in the early 1990s, Sheikh Zayed heard that a group of scientists were also staying in the Dhafra Beach Hotel, looking at fossiliferous outcrops in the region. He promptly asked to see them, and asked to be briefed upon their work. Being told that one of their discoveries was that a huge river had flowed through the area around five or six million years ago, he told them that there was an ancient tradition of a river running into the sea through what are now the great salt flats of the Sabkhat Matti.

That tradition clearly could not have come down from millions of years ago, long before Man appeared on earth, but geologists have now shown that freshwater was still discharging through the Sabkhat Matti into the sea seven or eight thousand years ago. Is the tradition, perhaps, a hazy memory of that more recent past, by which time the UAE's first inhabitants had arrived?

Similar interest was shown by Sheikh Zayed in the work of the Abu Dhabi Islands Archaeological Survey, ADIAS. Indeed, ADIAS owes its very existence to him. Back in 1991, ENHG Patron Sheikh Nahayan bin Mubarak Al Nahayan informed Sheikh Zayed that a group of British archaeologists had expressed an interest in carrying out surveys on some of Abu Dhabi's islands. Approval was promptly given, with a request that they should start work on Sir Bani Yas and Dalma.

When the team of archaeologists paid their first visit to Sir Bani Yas, in early 1992, Sheikh Zayed was on the island. Spotting them at work beginning their survey of the island, he invited them over for dinner to discuss their finds, providing them, at the same time, with useful anecdotal information on types of pottery used in the UAE in his youth.

And when, at the end of that first season of work, Sheikh Nahayan presented Sheikh Zayed with a summary report of their finds, the President promptly ordered the establishment of the Abu Dhabi Islands Archaeological Survey and provided it with regular funds so that the work could continue on a more structured basis.

In subsequent seasons of work, ADIAS identified on Sir Bani Yas the remains of a pre-Islamic Christian monastery, the first evidence that Christianity had reached the Emirates before the revelation of Islam. The archaeologists were, not surprisingly, slightly nervous as to how this discovery might be received. They need not have worried. Upon being informed, Sheikh Zayed responded by instructing that the work should continue, noting that this aspect of the country's heritage was also part of the history of its people.

Later, he continued to display an interest in a wide range of ADIAS discoveries, including most recently, the Late Stone Age village on Marawah, the oldest archaeological site yet identified in the United Arab Emirates (11), and the major Miocene fossil site near Ruwais, with its remains of four-tusked elephants and

other important finds (12).

In terms of the heritage of the UAE, it is clear that Sheikh Zayed was motivated by a genuine scientific curiosity to know more about the past. His curiosity was driven by a belief that today's Emiratis need to know of the ways of their ancestors, their lifestyle, how they survived, what resources they were able to call upon - in essence what were the circumstances that made them who they were.

Sheikh Zayed's statement about the need to understand the past in order to be able to cope with the challenges of the present and future has been cited above. Through understanding the ways of the past, he believed, the people of today are better able to recognise the significance of the changes of the modern world and, at the same time, to put them in context.

Similarly, in terms of environment and wildlife, through understanding and conserving it, he believed that Man today has a duty to maintain an evolving balance with Nature, to preserve it not merely for today's generation, but for the generations to come.

Sheikh Zayed was neither a scientist nor a historian, but in his curiosity about his own country and its history, and in his encouragement of research, he was a worthy successor to those great Arab Rulers of the past who created the cultural environment out of which came the great intellectual achievements of early Muslim Arab civilisation.

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