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International wildlife conservation body plans Oman expeditions

Project to survey Musandam peninsula for Arabian leopard

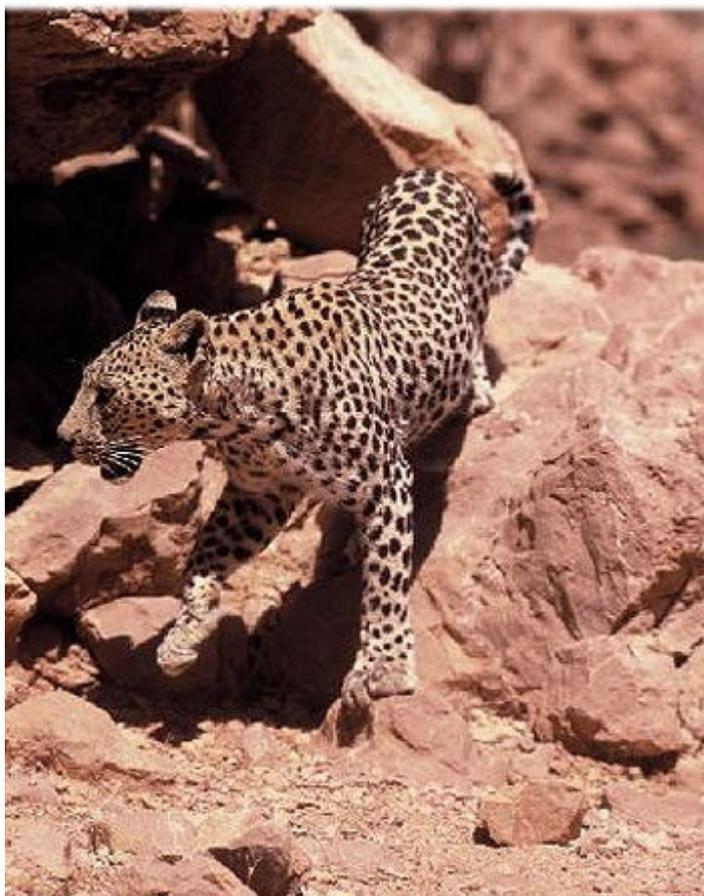
By Conrad Prabhu

MUSCAT — Oman has been accorded the rare honour of hosting expeditions by a leading international wildlife conservation organisation, which plans to survey the Musandam peninsula for the presence of the endangered Arabian leopard. UK-based Biosphere Expeditions, which has won a number of prestigious international awards for its pioneering work, has scheduled its Oman mission for January 2006.

The expeditions will be conducted in partnership with the Office of the Adviser for Conservation of the Environment (Diwan of Royal Court), Ministry of Regional Municipalities, Environment and Water Resources, and the Ministry of Tourism. The project has important implications for Oman's wildlife conservation efforts, as well as the country's aspirations as an international destination for eco-tourism, said a key official associated with the expeditions.

"This initiative represents a robust endorsement of the Omani government's environmental conservation drive," said Khalifa Hamed al Jahwari of the Office of the Adviser for Conservation of the Environment. "More importantly, it will put the Sultanate's unique wildlife, as well as other elements of its diverse natural heritage, in the international spotlight." Biosphere will lead a group of about 15 members on a scientific mission designed to establish whether the elusive Arabian leopard survives in the rugged mountains of the Musandam peninsula.

"The central objective is to look for evidence, if any, of the presence of the Arabian leopard in these mountains," explained Al Jahwari. "Although the species is known to thrive in the Jabal Samhan Nature Reserve in Dhofar Governorate, there are only anecdotal accounts of leopard sightings in the Musandam. Biosphere Expeditions will be working with conservation authorities in Oman to help resolve this question about the animal's existence in this part of the Sultanate."



Arabian leopard caught in a camera trap.

(c) Diwan of Royal Court - Oman

Once the flagship species of Oman's mountain habitats, the Arabian leopard now features along with the "critically endangered" among the IUCN's List of Threatened Species. It also figures high on the list of animals covered by the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES), which bans international trade in listed animals. Besides surveying the mountains for the presence of the leopard, the teams will also assess the status and distribution of its prey species like the Arabian tahr and feral goats. It will survey waterholes as hotspots for leopard movement, and also conduct interviews with local people.

Biosphere Expeditions is an award-winning, non-profit-making organisation offering hands-on wildlife conservation expeditions as an adventure with a purpose for everyone. Its initiatives, far from being tours, photographic safaris or excursions, are in fact genuine wildlife expeditions placing ordinary people with no research experience alongside scientists who are at the forefront of conservation work.

At the initiative of the Office of the Adviser for Conservation of the Environment (Diwan of Royal Court), a three-member team of Biosphere Expeditions made an exploratory visit to the Sultanate last September to examine the possibility of the Arabian leopard survey. They returned early last month on a 'final reconnaissance visit', and also met with local conservation staff, scientists and officials of various concerned ministries.

Initially, two expeditions to the Musandam peninsula are planned in early 2006: the first is scheduled from January 15-27, and the next from January 29 to February 10. Besides having a couple of expedition leaders and scientists, both teams will largely be made up of individuals "looking for adventure with a conscience and a sense of purpose, unlike any tourist or eco-tourist will ever have", says Biosphere Expeditions.



Mountain village.

Oman is the ninth destination targeted so far by Biosphere Expeditions for its ground-breaking conservation projects that combine adventure, remote locations, different cultures and people. Its initiatives have attracted praise from BBC Radio 4, and other international environment and media groups. The Oman expeditions are expected to lead to significant payoffs in promoting the country as an eco-tourism destination, officials stress.

Notes to Editors:

Background information on the organisation and its expedition itinerary are available at <http://www.biosphere-expeditions.org>. The media resources area containing this article is at <http://www.biosphere-expeditions.org/media/>.

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