

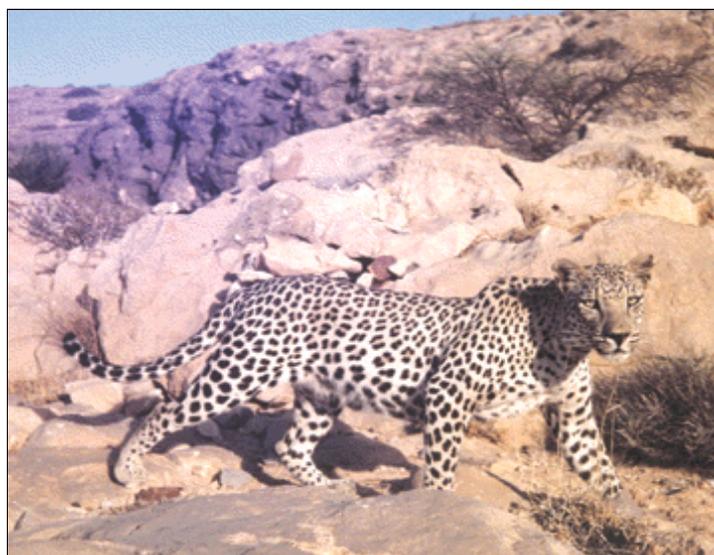


17 April 2005.

On the trail of the elusive Arabian leopard

The Office of the Adviser for Conservation of the Environment (Diwan of Royal Court) is joining forces with the award-winning Biosphere Expeditions of the UK to scour the majestic mountains of the Musandam Peninsula for evidence of the elusive Arabian leopard. A pair of back-to-back expeditions is planned in early 2006 — visits that also have the potential to usher in a new era in eco-tourism in the Sultanate

By Conrad Prabhu



The endangered Arabian leopard.

(c) The Office of the Adviser for Conservation of the Environment (Diwan of Royal Court)

"If you are looking for an adventure with a conscience and a sense of purpose, unlike any tourist or ecotourist will ever have, then Biosphere Expeditions is for you!" Thus goes the catchphrase of a unique volunteer organisation best-known for its success in drawing ordinary people to the cause of conservation work often in remote areas of the world.

Now, at the request of conservation authorities in the Sultanate, British-based Biosphere Expeditions has agreed to undertake a path-breaking survey in the Musandam Peninsula in its first-ever initiative in Gulf region. The group still has openings for wildlife conservation volunteers eager to join one of two expeditions to the lofty summits of the Musandam region scheduled during January-February 2006.

The subject of the survey is the Arabian leopard, the flagship species of Oman's mountain habitats and also among the most endangered of animals. Listed as "critically endangered" in the IUCN List of Threatened Species, it is on Appendix 1 of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES), which bans international trade in listed animals.

This majestic creature once thrived throughout the mountainous regions of Oman, Yemen, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Palestine and Jordan. However, by the 1990s the leopard became locally extinct in most areas of the Arabian peninsula and if viable populations remain, they are most likely to be found in the high mountains of Oman and Yemen.

While a strong population of Arabian leopards is now known to exist in the Jabal Samhan Nature Reserve in the Dhofar Governorate, the prospect of a similar occurrence of this elusive animal in the Musandam

mountains has preyed on the minds of conservative authorities for some time now. Local villagers have long spoken about the presence of the Arabian leopard in these rugged parts, but to date no scientific survey has been conducted.

Eager to explore the underlying eco-tourism potential of such conservation initiatives, the Office of the Adviser for Conservation of the Environment decided to enlist Biosphere Expeditions in the first ever survey of the Arabian leopard in the Musandam. Also collaborating in the project are the Ministry of Regional Municipalities, Environment & Water Resources and the Ministry of Tourism.



The expeditions are designed to check out anecdotal evidence of the presence of the Arabian leopard in the lofty summits of the Musandam peninsula.

(c) The Office of the Adviser for Conservation of the Environment (Diwan of Royal Court)



Scientist of Biosphere Expeditions with a local guide in the Musandam mountains.

(c) The Office of the Adviser for Conservation of the Environment (Diwan of Royal Court)

Last September, a three-member team from Biosphere Expeditions, comprising two scientists and a team leader visited the Sultanate for discussions ahead of the planned expeditions. They made a "reconnaissance visit" to the Musandam peninsula, while holding talks with conservation staff and local officials.

A joint team of Biosphere Expedition volunteers, scientists and local conservation officials will survey a wide swathe of the Musandam mountains for the Arabian leopard as well as its possible prey species like the Arabian tahr (a mountain goat) and feral goats. The expedition will also survey the mountains for water holes as possible hotspots of leopard movement, and conduct interviews with the local people.

Biosphere Expeditions will survey the area for leopard and its prey species, but as the natural prey species in the Musandam region of Oman are likely to be at very low levels, leopards often have to turn to domestic stock, mainly goats, for food. The socio-economic interaction with local people and herders will be a further area of investigation for the expedition.

Also as part of the project, the survey will also cover the occurrence of secondary landmark species like the Blanford's fox, red fox, caracal lynx, wildcat, Brandt's hedgehog, Ethiopian hedgehog, whitetailed mongoose.

Musandam, with its mountainous peaks rising to above 2,000 metres is the home of the Egyptian vulture, golden eagle and the chukar, a member of the Partridge family, among other species.

The first expedition is scheduled for January 15-27, and the next slated for January 29 to February 10, 2006. Each expedition will have up to 12 team members in addition to two local scientists or research assistants and an expedition leader.

Officials believe the survey will help resolve one of the enduring mysteries of Oman's wildlife heritage: whether or not the Arabian leopard lurks in the Musandam peninsula. Depending upon the outcome of the study, the survey will be expanded to progressively cover all of the mountainous peninsula to help conclusively rule in or rule out the presence of the Arabian leopard in this parts.

The presence of Biosphere Expeditions on the expedition team is a major boost for Oman's conservation campaign. The UK based body is an award-winning, non-profit-making organisation offering hands-on wildlife conservation expeditions as an adventure with a purpose for everyone. Its projects are hailed as genuine wildlife expeditions placing ordinary people with no research experience alongside scientists who are at the forefront of conservation work.

Biosphere Expeditions promotes sustainable conservation and preservation of the planet's wildlife by forging alliances between scientists and the public. Its goal is to make an active contribution towards a sustainable biosphere where each part can thrive and exist.

"At Biosphere Expeditions we believe in empowering ordinary people by placing them at the centre of scientific study and by actively involving them out in the field where there is conservation work to be done. We always work in close conjunction with local people and scientists, and make sure that the fruits of our expedition work benefit our local helpers, their society and the environment they live in," says the organisation in its mission statement.

It further adds: "Adventure, remote locations, different cultures and people are part and parcel of our expeditions, but also the knowledge that you will have played an active role in conserving part of our planet's biosphere. We exist for those who, through their hands-on work, want to make a difference to the survival of the particular species or habitat under investigation, and to the world at large. We invite everyone to come and join us out in the field, at the forefront of conservation, to work, learn, experience and take responsible guardianship of our biosphere."

Biosphere Expeditions is unique in that it only collaborates with reputable scientists, research institutions and educational establishments (wherever possible from the host nation) who are experts in their field. Besides, it only collaborates with organisations and businesses which operate in an ethical and/or sustainable way. The organisation pledges to operate itself in an ethical and sustainable way, minimising negative impacts on local cultures, environments and economies.

It undertakes to work in close conjunction with local people and make sure that the fruits of its expedition work benefit local helpers, their society and the environment they live in (www.biosphere-expeditions.org).

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/>.

Biosphere Expeditions, Sprat's Water, near Carlton Colville, The Broads National Park, Suffolk NR33 8BP, UK.
info@biosphere-expeditions.org, Tel.: +44-1502-583085, Fax: +44-1502-587414
in Germany / Deutschland:
deutschland@biosphere-expeditions.org, Tel.: +49-7127-980242, Fax: +49-7127-8878776