Oman can offer a compelling sense of exploration and discovery, and a wildlife holiday that few would imagine possible. Tourism aimed specifically at those interested in the natural environment, or eco-tourism, may be the keystone to the future of the industry in Oman. Thoughtfully planned and carefully managed it will allow for the generation of revenue without clashing with conservation concerns and cultural heritage.

The stark beauty and wide range of contrasting landscapes that characterize the country create habitats for a wealth of wildlife. Among the variety of fauna and flora are millions of migrant wading birds passing through year after year; entire marine ecosystems unique to science; mountain, desert and shoreline plants of stunning diversity; desert dwellers of surprising abundance; endangered Arabian mammals like leopard and oryx; seashells of exquisite nature; coral reefs that stud the sea with vibrant colours; innumerable endemic fish; whales and dolphins from coast to coast and turtles that nest in numbers matched by no other country on the planet. And alongside the natural wealth is a culture as rich as the sea, mountain and desert environments with which it has arisen.

THE MOUNTAINOUS NORTH

Wadis dissect the mountains of northern and central Oman and provide the only means of access to many areas. While most wadis are seasonal, some have a constant flow of water, attracting settlement and also wildlife. Red foxes are frequent evening visitors, skirting the villages in search of scraps. Mountain gazelle are still a regular sight and their ‘v’ shaped hoof prints (distinct from the two parallel imprints left by a goat hoof) are easy to find in sandy areas. Hares, which include a race unique to Oman, small rodents and even wolves may still be found, although the latter are more likely to be seen further south.

To access many of the areas where wildlife is more commonly encountered means leaving your vehicle and continuing on foot. Blue-headed agamid lizards will scurry from sun-drenched rocks at your approach and ‘water snakes’ (most commonly, racers) will lie in wait, or at the edge of pools for unsuspecting fish, other reptiles, Arabian toads and even rodents that dare to venture to the water’s edge to drink. Bats can be found in many of the extensive cave systems and birds of prey such as Egyptian Vultures and, for the lucky, Golden Eagles, circle above magnificent mountain panoramas. A trip to see the remarkable juniper forests at the 3000 metre summit of Jabal Shams (‘Sun Mountain’) is well worth the effort, if only to take in the breathtaking views on top of Arabia’s highest peak. Here is one of the few places in the peninsula where snowfall is not unexpected in winter months. Visitors to Oman’s northern mountains should also keep a vigilant eye open for the nimble-footed taar, a rare and shy goat-like animal confined and unique to this small, mountainous part of the world.

DESERTS

The deserts of Oman vary from the rolling sand seash of the Wahiba, with classic photogenic dunes of rich gold, to the flat stony Jiddat al Harasis in central Oman and the Rub al-Khali or ‘Empty Quarter’ further south, where individual mountains of sand rise from a flat desert and stretch endlessly across the border into Saudi Arabia. However, far from being empty, the desert is host to a surprising amount of wildlife. Caracal lynx, sand foxes and wild sand cats, with hair-covered feet that help provide grip in soft sand, are some of the larger predators. Rhee gazelle, Arabia’s largest gazelle, also seem to prefer sandy regions. On rocky outcrops, such as the Huqf escarpment to the east of the Jiddat al Harasis plains, live Nubian ibex. They are also found in more mountainous areas in Oman. The males, in particular, are an impressive sight, sporting magnificient horns with which they spar for females. The desert provides habitat too for skinks, lizards and geckos and their more deadly cousins, such as the saw-scales or carpet viper and the horned adder. A host of small rodents survive the desert heat despite the high metabolic rates of small mammals. A number of species of gerbils, jirds, jerboas, mice, shrews and rats have all adapted to life under harsh conditions. Flocks of Coronetted, Chestnut-bellied, Spotted and Lichtenstein’s Sandgrouse can be regularly seen at precise times, soaking their modified breast feathers in precious watering holes and transporting the stored water to ground nests some distance away. There are very few people, even those who have visited desert environments many times, who are not continually surprised and enthralled by the activity and profusion of wildlife.

WHITE ORYX PROJECT

In the flat stony desert of central Oman live the famous Arabian oryx. Once hunted to extinction in the wild, the last herds were seen in this area in the early 1970s. Fortunately a small collection of 200 animals existed in a number of separate localities around the world from which suitably mixed herds could be assembled. Now, reintroduced herds enjoy the protection of the conservation-minded ways of the local Harasis tribes, members of which have become their guardian rangers. Vegetation, nourished by sea blown mists, supports the oryx numbering over 230 animals, many of which were born in the wild. Some are even second generation wild animals. World-wide the Arabian or White Oryx Project in Oman is heralded as one of the most successful animal reintroduction schemes ever attempted and the entire area where the oryx now roam has been designated a world heritage park.

DOHFAR

Precambrian basement sediments have formed the Dhofar mountains in the far south of Oman. The mountains and narrow coastal belt benefit each year from moisture laden south-west monsoon winds or khareef. Rains from early July to the end of August and heavy mists create lush green hillsides and cool temperatures more reminiscent of an English spring than an Arabian summer.
Immediately behind the mountain range the desert heat continues to scorch the earth. With obvious reason, this seasonal transition has created a haven for many forms of wildlife and has made possible spectacular mountain drives and hikes. The best time to visit is September, when mists have lifted to reveal the luxuriant green landscape.

The capital of the southern region of Dhofar is Salalah, known throughout Arabia as 'The Garden City'. It has the feel of a small East African coastal town, relaxed, cool and humid and rife with banana, coconut, sugarcane and papaya plantations. Beyond the plains of Salalah where frankincense trees grow, rise the wooded hillsides of Jabal Qara. The vegetation that clads the southern mountains is unique in Arabia. The dominant and endemic Amoheissus dhofarica was only scientifically described in 1979 despite its abundance. Among the vegetation are trees more commonly associated with Africa and Asia, such as the enormous and bizarre baobab. There is a population of about 50 baobab trees growing on the sloping valleys of Wadi Hinna, not far from Salalah. Perhaps these are a relict population of a once wider distribution of the species or perhaps they are a reminder of earlier traders from East Africa. The desert rose is an attractive and distinctive plant which was used for medicinal purposes by the Jibbali people of the Dhofar hills.

Although there are no permanent watercourses in Dhofar, during the monsoon great waterfalls tumble over limestone cliffs into the sea several hundred feet below, and springs such as those at Ayn Razat and Ayn Jarsis bubble with mists and rains during exceptional years. However, even where the greenery ends, wildlife thrives. Leopard, caracal, hyaena, wolf and ratel all find territories along with many others. Hedgehogs and the nocturnal porcupines leave evidence of their presence with a handful of shed quills, and birds pass through in their thousands. Where wadis reach the sea, lagoons, or khors, form along the coast, acting as a focal point for wildlife, especially birds. Reeds and reedmace typically line the landward rims of the khors while the salt tolerant mangrove trees spread to seaward in more saline conditions. Some of the more spectacular birds to frequent Oman are to be found in khors. The stately flamingo filters food from the shallow sediments, colourful ducks, storks, stilts, plovers, sandpipers, egrets and herons wade nearby and the glossy ibis feeds on insects at the water’s edge. Some of the khors are set aside as reserve areas where visitors are not allowed. However, the majority will remain open to the public provided that due care and respect is paid to the wildlife and its fragile habitat.

To the north-east of Salalah, still in the southern province of Dhofar, is a beautiful sand beach 30 km in length that sweeps the bay that is the mouth of Oman’s largest and probably most spectacular wadi - Wadi Shuwaymiyah. The wadi forms a huge snaking canyon, sided by dramatic vertical cliffs of white limestone. Long fingers of porous travertine form stalactites along overhanging cliff edges and deep permanent pools of sweet water are advertised by the growth of surrounding vegetation. The scenery is fascinating and quite breath-taking and the canyons form a natural refuge for wildlife and may be considered a valuable national nature reserve. Hyrax, a colonial rodent-like animal that through its bone structure shows a common ancestry with elephant and rhinoceros, will issue its warning to others on the approach of human visitors and dart into the many nooks and crannies between boulders on the canyon floors. Hyaena, ibex and gazelle are among many other mammals to be seen and Green Pigeons can be found roosting in wild fig trees, while owls call at night. Wadi Shuwaymiyah lies in a remote and difficult region to access. Perhaps this is fortunate, for the wealth of natural beauty may remain relatively untouched and undisturbed.

The coast of Dhofar boasts some of the most beautiful beaches in the Sultanate. At certain times of the year many of these beaches are criss-crossed by the tracks of turtles that return seasonally to nest. The beaches below the spectacular headlands and cliffs of Ras al Hamar, just half an hour’s drive west of Salalah, is one place where it is possible, in late summer months, to watch both green and loggerhead turtles nesting simultaneously.

TURTLE-WATCHING

There are, in fact, four species of turtle that nest in Oman, (the highly endangered hawksbill and the rare-for-the-region olive ridley, are the other two), some in world record and globally significant numbers. The best location for turtle-watching is about 400 km south-east of Muscat, not far from the dhow-building port of Sur, at Ras al Hadd. Here green turtles nest all year round in numbers that exceed any other single location in the Indian Ocean (see Arabian Wildlife, Vol 1, No. 2).

Permits are provided by the Ministry of Regional Municipalities and Environment for camping in the Ras al Hadd area, which...
has been designated a national nature reserve. The campsite to which visitors are restricted is situated at two of the prime nesting beaches. Turtle-watching tourists are guided by locally employed turtle wardens from nearby villages, such as Ra's al Junays. Rules and regulations are designed to prevent disturbance of the globally endangered turtles, but still allow for good viewing. The sight of a full grown female turtle emerging from the sea to lay her eggs as her ancestors have been doing for the past 90 million years, is an exciting experience that is not easily forgotten. Photography is encouraged only at dawn.

ECO-TOURISM IN OMAN

The government of Oman, particularly through the Ministry of Regional Municipalities and Environment, has carried out many scientific studies and surveys in order to set aside key regions of importance to wildlife as protected areas. The Directorate General of Nature Protectorates is in the process of planning legislation and effective natural reserve systems to ensure the conservation of natural resources. Similarly, the Directorate General of Tourism is, at the time of writing, reviewing policies and investigating the possibility of eco-tourism in new areas.

Visitors to Oman who wish to view the natural wildlife and beauty of the country should be aware that some areas may soon be placed under controlled access and it is sensible to seek the advice of officials for up-to-date information.

We should all remember our responsibility to protect Oman’s wildlife and its range of valuable habitats.

As a country new to the concept of eco-tourism, both the environment and the culture of a distinct and deserving people require time to adapt to the pressures that are inevitably forced upon them by the tourism industry. Those people fortunate enough to explore the Sultanate today will be the first to acknowledge the need to protect the fragile ecosystems and the sensitive culture of a beautiful country for those who will explore and enjoy it in the future.

Rob Baldwin

UNDERWATER OMAN

There is a wealth of scenery, wildlife, pleasure and opportunity awaiting divers in the Sultanate of Oman. There is also the constant promise of discovery of new places, species and phenomena. Much of the rocky coast and islands of the Sultanate with their many exciting underwater sites are easily accessible to divers. The water is warm all year round and the underwater world offers dramatic scenery, close contact with nature, and great opportunity for exploratory diving. A lucky few have even dived with whales in Oman and snorkelling with dolphins is a hobby of those who have taken time to get to know these intelligent and lovable marine mammals. There remain many areas that have never been dived before and knowing that you are the first human being to view a particular site conveys a sense of excitement and anticipation. The observant are rewarded with new species of fishes, corals, shells and almost any other form of marinelife.

USEFUL ADDRESSES

for the Sultanate of Oman

All of the tour companies in the Sultanate should be aware of the rules and regulations governing wildlife observation and visits to protected areas, but there is really only one that is especially interested and educated in eco-tourism. Aries Tours, run by Heide Biel from the Al Falaj hotel (PO Box 2031, Ruwi 112, Tel 968-702311), is extremely well equipped to cater for almost any of the varied preferences of wildlife enthusiasts.

The Historical Association of Oman (PO Box 3941, Ruwi 112, Oman) is a non-governmental organization that has a special interest in the natural history of the Sultanate. They will also be able to direct you to specialist organizations such as the Horticultural Society, PO Box 1591, CPO 111, Oman. Tel 968-797252.

Birdwatchers can obtain information and copies of the Oman Bird List from the Oman Bird Records Committee, PO Box 246, Muscat 113, Oman.

The Oman Natural History Museum (ONHM) (PO Box 668, Muscat 113, Oman; Tel 968-605400) houses superb displays of most of the wildlife to be found in Oman, including a section on marine fauna and flora and a separate and outstanding whale hall. A newly formed volunteer whale rescue team, contactable through ONHM, may be able to provide additional information on where and when to watch whales and dolphins at sea.

Diving anywhere in Oman is monitored by the Oman Diving Federation (PO Box 199, Medinat Qaboos 115, Oman; Tel 968-950261) through the Oman Dive Centre (ODC) at Bandar Jissah. Permits must be obtained from the ODC before entering the underwater world (at a current daily rate of one Omani rial). The ODC is extremely well equipped and offers overnight camping trips and traditional dhow cruises among its range of dive excursions.

The Arabian Seas Expedition has produced a half hour film on diving in Oman, aimed at the diving tourist. Films are available from PO Box 50119, Medinat Qaboos 115, Oman; Tel 968-736230 or through the Directorate General of Tourism, PO Box 550, Muscat 113, Oman; Tel 968-774331.