The Farasan islands have an interesting geological past. They are low lying and their surface is composed of fossilised corals forming low hills. The vegetation of the islands mainly consists of xerophytic scrub, herbs and perennial grasses. Perhaps the most attractive feature of the flora are the mangrove stands which grow along the bays of the larger islands. This nature reserve is the only one of its kind in the Kingdom where a large variety of shore birds, terrestrial mammals, sea turtles, multicoloured fish, the manatee, dolphins, sharks, crabs, colourful coral reefs, the rare aloe, sea weeds and mangroves can be found together. This plethora of plant and animal life provides a setting of enchanting beauty and a wildlife treasure which is not matched elsewhere in the Middle East.
The ferry from the ancient port of Jizan to Farasan Kebir is a daily event which takes place without much fanfare. Traders load their pickups and trucks into the hulk of the ship as it sails westward each morning. The merchandise varies. There are vegetables, fruits, various sundries, goats, sheep, chicken and from time to time household appliances and furniture, headed toward the islands which are inhabited by about five thousand people of different ethnic groups. Some are permanent settlers - fishermen who have been working on the islands for hundreds of years, others are government employees while a few are people who have come from far away lands to work in the Kingdom. They are teachers, doctors, nurses, technicians and handymen who come to run the institutes and machinery, which makes human life on the islands functional, such as the desalination plant, the hospital, schools and the port.

The three hour trip is a sombre affair for most of the passengers. The traders who take little interest in the mundane journey spread their blankets and sleep the entire length of the trip amidst the noise of the other passengers. The more enthusiastic Farasanis gather in groups to play cards while sipping hot tea. Still others, mostly first timers, gaze at the waves and the endless body of water. Occasionally they are surprised by the appearance of a school of dolphins which emerge on the surface of the water, swim along the ferry for a while and then disappear into the depths of the deep blue sea. Such sightings always stir interest among the passengers as they scurry to the deck to observe these superb swimmers cutting through the water with total confidence.

Riding the ferry one wonders how the Red Sea was formed. This body of water, with depths reaching 2335 m (7590 feet) near Sheibara on the north Arabian coast, is full of mysteries. It takes its name from the extensive red coral reef beds which spread along the steep shorelines. During the winter months strong southerly winds raise the level of water in the north of the sea while in summer it is a metre lower than the winter level as a result of strong northerly winds. The Red Sea trough was formed by movements of the earth's crust and the crushing of faults against one another in successive phases from Eocene times. Modifications are still taking place in the trough as a result of the eastward drift of the Arabian Peninsula from the African land mass. During the Miocene the sea had no outlet to the Indian ocean and when cut off from the Mediterranean by an uplifting of the land between Syria and the Libyan desert, the water body became an inland sea. Later movements led to the formation of the deep central trough and probably opened the outlet to the Gulf of Aden.

Two thirds along the journey a few points of interest appear. These are merely small coral islands, inhabited by shore birds and seagulls. One or two have a few fishermen huts too. They are makeshift structures made of wooden planks, which are washed by the sea to the shores, and tin roofs. The islands themselves are pale brown in colour with little or no vegetation. Their surface is uneven and sharp. A closer look at the rocks suggest that their building block is a conglomerate of corals and seashells. Over the aeons the dead corals became fossilised as a result of tremendous pressure and chemical reactions at the bottom of the sea.
and were cemented together into a thick crust of calcified material. Such binding took place millions of years ago, resulting in the formation of the islands which came to be known as Jaza’ir Farasan, or the Farasan islands. The name comes from fares, which in Arabic means a kind of date.

The Farasan islands have an interesting geological past. They are low lying and their surface is composed of fossilised corals forming low hills. The islands are full of faults with irregular gullies and cliffs up to ten metres high in some places. It is believed that Miocene salt deposits of the sea bed pushed up the overlying sedimentary rocks and produced an uplifted dome area upon which coral reefs developed. Further uplifting of the sea floor raised the coral reefs above sea level resulting in the formation of the islands. The rock surfaces are extremely rough and as a consequence the islands have little soil cover but for small portions of the wadibeds. On Zefaf island, extensive uplifting has resulted in the formation of a 86 metres (280 feet) high dome known as Jabal Zefaf. High coral reefs form steep sea cliffs along the shoreline of the islands. Sand banks occur where the reefs are absent and salt flats extend from the shoreline to the coral hills.

Precipitation in the area is low and hence the islands lack any streams or other water bodies. Sporadic rainfall does occur which creates intermittent runners toward the sea. These runners are densely vegetated near the shoreline. The climate is humid and hot throughout the year, though the sea breeze ameliorates the extensive humidity and temperature during the winter months. The high subterranean water table within the islands enables the shrubs to stay green throughout the year.

The vegetation of the islands is mainly composed of xerophytic scrub, herbs and perennial grasses. Perhaps the most attractive feature of the flora are the mangrove stands which grow along the bays of the larger islands. These stands produce a picturesque blend of the deep blue sea supinely mingling with the green mangroves. Lack of soil cover in insular areas has resulted in generally sparse vegetation. Where soil has accumulated in depressions among the coral rocks, certain grasses and sedge grow. The deeper wadibeds support a substantial number of bushes and trees. Forbs and weeds respond to the sporadic rainfall which turns parts of the islands to deceptively lush-looking patches that disappear within a few weeks. The spectacular, but short-lived display of annual flowers following the rain belies the aridity of the area. This colourful display disappears within a few weeks and only seeds are left on the barren soil. With time the seeds are covered with a thin layer of soil where they remain dormant for an extended period of time until the next rainfall.

A majority of the people are fishermen who fish in the shallow waters of the bays with baited hooks tied to a nylon string. This gear is not effective in a commercial catch hence the fishermen have to spend long hours in the sea. Some of them continue to fish even when the sea is stormy. Unable to return home they spend the night on one of the many uninhabited islands in their clumsy shacks. When their storage boxes are filled with the catch they immediately head for Jizan to sell the fish. Day or night they transport the gutted fish to the buyers. There is probably a good reason for their haste. Their boats lack refrigeration facilities thus they have to get the fish to the market while it is still fresh.

Agriculture is practised in small sized plots in the wadibeds by some of the inhabitants but due to the low rainfall crops do not grow in any abundance and the majority of the foodstuffs are imported from the mainland. Most of the old farms were built in wadibeds where soils have accumulated over the centuries as a result of the omnipresent blowing of the wind. These plots have to be protected from the livestock and feral donkeys that graze freely on the islands. The farmers efficiently utilise coral rocks for this purpose. Each farm has a one metre high wall made of the rocks which come in different shapes and sizes. Because of this the walls are usually irregular. Despite their shape they are functional and keep the marauding goats out of the corn fields.

Life on the islands is changing with increasing human settlements. Most of the people make a subsistence living from fishing and small scale farming. Because of transportation costs the price of food commodities, fuel and everything else that is needed for daily survival are higher. Unable to afford natural gas as an energy source the villagers resort to cutting deadwood which grows in the runners. One day as I was on the lookout for gazelles I heard something rustling in the thickets of a runner which I happened to be investigating. I observed the area for some time but nothing seemed to stir. Then I saw a man with a load of wood come out of the thicket. He started going toward his village which was about two kilometres away. What surprised me most was that he was barefoot and was walking on the razor sharp coral rocks without hindrance. The sharp rocks ruin shoes in a matter of weeks. I assumed that his feet were so adapted to this hostile environment that he did not even feel the sharpness of the rocks.

The fishermen maintain small herds of goats which are allowed to range freely on the islands. Each morning the goats and cows are taken out of their holding pens and walked out of the village. They start wandering in the direction of vegetation where they feed for the entire day and return home at sunset. The livestock mainly stay in
the wadis and runners near the villages where the terrain is not rough thus causing extensive damage to the vegetation. Some of the goats become disoriented in the labyrinth of the faults and are unable to find the village, or probably like the freedom which the terrain offers and do not return home. Such feral goats roam in the rough stretches of the islands and compete with the gazelles. They are wary of humans and take off when they see someone approaching them.

The islands were a forbidden land at the turn of the century. Outlaws were left there to serve their sentence in banishment. The islands have also served as a strategic outpost of the Red Sea. The Ottomans built a fortress on Gumah island during the sixteenth century. Remnants of the structure are still present to this day. In order to expel the Portuguese from the Indian Ocean the Turks organised several major naval expeditions which turned into costly failures. The Portuguese continued to maintain control of the Indian Ocean whereas the Ottomans became masters of the Red Sea. A century later the British government of India tried to open direct communications between India and Britain by way of the Red Sea. But this attempt never materialised.

An effort was also undertaken to establish an outpost on Zefaf island at Khur al Turk. A number of stone structures and rusted pipes are the vestiges of this attempt and can still be found at the inlet. The name of the inlet suggests that the Turks were probably the ones who tried to establish a presence on the island prior to the decline of the Ottoman empire. These historical events had little effect on the natural beauty of the islands. Many species of birds use the islands as a breeding colony. Some are permanent residents which maintain their nest sites throughout the year while others, like the sea turtles visit the shores to lay their eggs then head back to the water leaving their incubation to nature.

The Farasan gazelle is the flagship wildlife species of the islands. Farasan Kebir and Zefaf together have a population of over a thousand gazelles. There are several theories as to how the gazelles occupied the islands. It is thought that during the last ice age the dropping of sea level resulted in the formation of a land bridge with the mainland enabling the animals to colonise the main island. The local people, however, believe that the gazelles were brought to the islands by fishermen to diversify their staple diet of fish. The animals were kept in enclosures made of coral rocks but some managed to escape from them and established a free ranging population.

Isolated in an island setting the Farasan gazelle has been spared from the ravages of hunters who have driven the mainland gazelles to the brink of extinction. These animals form the largest population of wild gazelles in the Kingdom and their protection is of utmost importance if their genetic diversity is to be maintained.

This elysium is rich in biological diversity too. It is the only reserve in the Kingdom where a large variety of shore birds and raptors, terrestrial mammals, sea turtles, multi-coloured fish, the manatee, dolphins, sharks, crabs, colourful coral reefs, the rare aloe, sea weeds and mangroves are found together. This plethora of plant and animal life provides a setting of enchanting beauty and a wildlife treasure which is not matched elsewhere in the Middle East.

The Farasan archipelago is an important haven for green and hawksbill turtles, both endangered species. The islands’ beaches offer suitable nesting sites for the turtles. The green turtle lives on the sea grasses and breeds in summer while the hawksbill is an inhabitant of coral reefs and mates in early spring. To lay eggs the female digs a large egg-laying chamber in the sand in which 100-120 eggs are laid in one night. Three to ten days later she returns to the chamber to lay more eggs. Each female lays a total of 400-500 eggs and may stay in the area for one to two months. After laying the eggs the females return to the sea. The eggs are incubated by the heating of the sand during the daytime. Once the young are hatched, in about two months time, they come out from the sand and instinctively head toward the sea. The journey from the chamber to the sea is short but fraught with danger as the newborns become the victims of predators such as sea gulls and raptors.

The islands support thousands of shorebirds. Due to the extreme aridity land bird diversity on the islands is poor with only a few resident species. Among them the desert lark and the ubiquitous house sparrow are common. Of the twenty breeding species, the majority are seabirds or birds associated with littoral environments. On the shores of the islands a large number of shore birds and waders are seen throughout the year. Most noticeable among them are the pink-backed pelican, which breeds on the islands, the greater flamingo, found in small groups, crab plovers and stilts.

Of particular interest are the large colonies of the common noddyl, the red-billed tropic bird and the goliath heron. The crab plover is a gregarious species which is seen in large flocks along the picturesque shoreline. The colonies move up and down the sandy beaches with the rhythm of the tides. Large flocks of plovers numbering in the thousands use the islands as a stopover on their spring migration.

Among the raptors, the sooty falcon is common and it is estimated that about 300 birds nest on the islands, which makes it the highest breeding concentration of the species anywhere. The osprey also breeds on the islands. It builds its nest perched on coral rocks among the hills. Pairs defend the nest with great ferocity once
A trail that I used daily passed close to a nest site. The birds were always wary and protested when I passed the spot. The Egyptian vulture is another common species which also breeds on the islands. Other seabirds such as the white-eyed gull, swift tern and Caspian tern perform their acrobatic feats flying restlessly over the surface of the waves looking for fragments of food. The little owl which is hard to spot because of its nocturnal activity also nests here.

Rich in the diversity of life the Farasan islands, despite their arid setting with rainfall averaging no more than 50 mm a year, form a unique landscape whose biological integrity has been maintained over the centuries. The Farasan gazelle forms the largest concentration of this enchanting antelope in the Kingdom. Its numbers are on the rise on Farasan Kebir. Aerial surveys conducted in 1993 suggest that the population has almost doubled over the years since the area was declared protected. The animals have dispersed into marginal habitats which were not used before. With a rise in numbers scientific management is required to control the population from increasing to an extent where it will not be able to maintain itself and eventually result in a die-off which could be triggered by drought or lack of food resources - a case all too familiar among island populations. Because of their limited size, islands are not as productive as mainland areas and an increase in the population of one species can have detrimental effects on the survival of other species. Such an event seems to have taken place on Zefaf a decade ago. About thirty carcasses found near the shoreline suggest the animals had succumbed possibly due to a drought which prevailed at the time. The introduction of exotic species by man is a worldwide dilemma that has had a detrimental effect on endemic island populations. The Indian mongoose has been introduced on the mainland of Farasan Kebir. It has probably dispersed to Segid which is connected to Farasan Kebir by a land bridge. The nocturnal habits of the mongoose belies its hunting ability. This elusive critter has acquired commensal habits on the island and lives near human settlements. At night when human activity is minimal it can be seen on the lookout for prey and scraps of food. Its canny ability to remain hidden makes it an effective hunter.

Domestic cats have also been introduced on various islands. Living out in the wilderness these cats have acquired feral habits and stay aloof from humans. On the southern shore of Zefaf a feral cat visited my campsite regularly at night as did the hermit crabs. Having lost their unique life forms, especially adapted to the islands biogeography. If harmony is not struck with human activities this island paradise will lose its natural beauty and superb biodiversity. The majestic setting of the Farasan Islands deserves to be maintained as a site of natural heritage and attempts should be taken in this direction to proclaim it as one of the world heritage sites. Hence it is all the more important to curtail activities which are detrimental to the ecology of the islands. The archipelago supports a large number of shorebirds which nest on the shoreline and waders may abandon visiting the food rich shorelines due to human disturbance. Little is known about the life history, ecology and survival tactics of the islands' wildlife. Thus it is not clear how devastating the effects of human activities will be on the flora and fauna of the islands. Hence it is all the more important to undertake ecological impact studies prior to the launching of major development projects. Areas which are eco-sensitive to development such as the mangroves, coral reefs, the breeding colonies of turtles, core areas used by gazelles, and the feeding sites of shorebirds should be protected at all costs. Development can take place without harming the fragile ecosystem if it is properly planned. Let us manage this reserve in a way so that the natural heritage of this Red Sea jewel is sustained and protected and future generations may be able to enjoy its unique beauty and splendid wildlife.