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A Guide to Biodiversity Conservation in the UAE

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Mangrove, Ras al Khaimah - UAE

GLOBAL OVERVIEW

Since the launch of the Global Strategic Plan for Biodiversity 2011-2020 in 2010 to guide global action during the United Nations Decade on Biodiversity 2011-2020, encouraging steps have been taken around the world to tackle biodiversity loss at many levels. Nevertheless, they were not sufficient to fully achieve the Aichi Biodiversity Targets by the set deadlines, although six targets have been partially achieved.

There has been significant expansion of protected areas between 2000 and 2020, from about 10% to at least 15% terrestrially, and from about 3% to at least 7% in marine areas. However, protected area networks remain ecologically unrepresentative, many critical sites for biodiversity are poorly conserved, and open ocean and deep-sea areas, including the high seas, are not well covered.

Loss of forest habitats in some regions, e.g., the Brazilian Amazon, has been significantly slowed. However, deforestation in many other tropical areas of the world is still increasing, and habitats of all types, including grasslands, wetlands, and river systems, continue to be fragmented and degraded.

Despite individual success stories, the average risk of extinction for birds, mammals, and amphibians is still increasing. According to the latest statistics, over 8,400 species of wild fauna and flora are critically endangered, while close to

30,000 are endangered or vulnerable.

Genetic diversity of domesticated livestock is also eroding, with more than one-fifth of breeds at the risk of extinction, and the wild relatives of domesticated crop species are increasingly threatened by habitat fragmentation and climate change.

Habitats important for ecosystem services, for example wetlands and forests, continue to be lost and degraded. However, restoration is underway for some depleted or degraded ecosystems sometimes on a very ambitious scale. Many countries, organizations, and companies have pledged to restore large areas.

Important progress has been achieved in incorporating biodiversity values into planning processes and strategies to reduce poverty. There has also been progress in terms of integrating natural capital into national accounts. Wide variations among countries remain, but international initiatives are helping reduce these differences.

The sustainability of the marine environment – seas, oceans, and coastal regions – is among the most vital multilateral issues for the international community, given its critical role in maintaining food security and mitigating climate change. Therefore, the world is moving towards reinforcing the governance of these environments by adopting the ecosystem approach to limiting pollution from various maritime and land-based sources while developing a sustainable blue economy.

In a business-as-usual scenario, biodiversity and the services it provides will continue to decline due to the increasing impacts of land and sea use, overexploitation, climate change, pollution, and invasive alien species. These pressures are being driven by unsustainable production and

consumption patterns, population growth, and technological progress. However, it is not too late to slow, halt, and eventually reverse the decline of biodiversity. The actions needed to achieve this turnaround align with the objectives of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Paris Agreement.



Green Sea Turtle

LOCAL CONTEXT

The UAE is situated in an arid region with some of the highest temperatures in the world. The country is characterized by diverse desert, mountainous, and marine environments, as well as rapid pace of development and high population density, especially along the coast, where urban areas and residential communities are interspersed with industrial and agricultural lands, including cultivated forests.

During the past decades, the UAE has taken multiple actions and measures to conserve biodiversity. Nevertheless, its terrestrial and marine ecosystems still face many natural and human pressures and threats. These include economic and urban development and the consequent change in land use, increasing water consumption, overgrazing, overfishing, pollution from land and marine sources, invasive alien species, and climate change.

The UAE proactively works to promote a culture of biodiversity conservation at home and abroad. Conserving wildlife and ensuring its sustainability is one of the nation’s strategic priorities. The country is home to unique biodiversity that includes a range of living organisms and natural terrestrial and aquatic habitats, which form ecosystems together.

The UAE’s commitment to protecting species and their habitats is reflected in the National Biodiversity Strategy.

The country currently has 49 designated protected areas that account for over 15 percent of its territory.

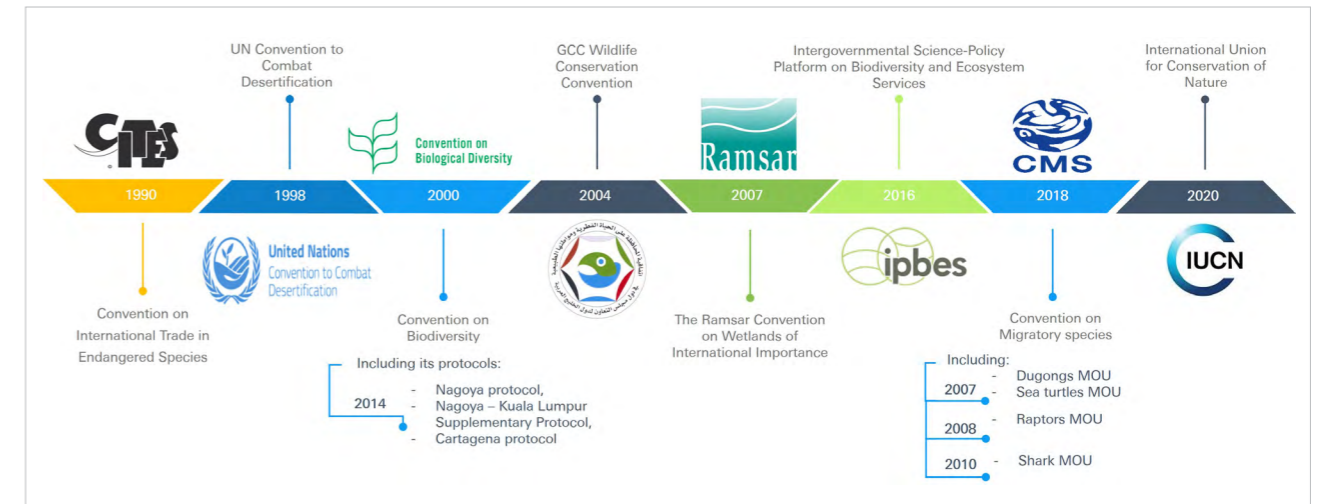
As a coastal country, the UAE is also committed to ocean conservation and protecting blue carbon ecosystems. To maximize the potential of nature-based climate change solutions, we have pledged to plant 100 million mangroves by 2030. We also actively participate in coral rehabilitation, running several pioneering projects.

Our marine environment has maintained its characteristics, natural resources, and the beauty of its beaches overlooking the Arabian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman despite the challenges posed by economic and population growth along our coastline. Sea water quality has been preserved across open marine areas, beaches, marine reserves, and coastal habitats. In addition, we have successfully limited the decline in fish stocks through a set of policies and measures.

Furthermore, we have a proven track record of developing and implementing effective conservation initiatives to protect endangered species.

The UAE has joined multiple international conventions that aim to conserve species and their habitats.

INTERNATIONAL CONVENTIONS



CITES

The Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) aims to ensure that international trade in specimens of wild animals and plants does not threaten their survival.

As part of its efforts to protect wildlife from extinction, the UAE joined CITES under Federal Decree No. 86 of 1989, followed by the agreement signing in 1990.

The country’s major border crossings are carefully monitored and fitted out with the required equipment to combat illegal trade in endangered species. To build capacities in this field, specialized training courses are organized on a regular basis for veterinarians, agricultural engineers, customs authorities, and other relevant parties.

In line with the UAE Government’s objective of establishing the UAE as a forerunner in the provision of smart services, all CITES permits are issued electronically with an electronic signature and a QR code since February 2, 2021.

Nagoya – Kuala Lumpur Supplementary Protocol on Liability and Redress to the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety

The UAE signed the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety to the CBD in 2014. The objective of this Supplementary Protocol is to contribute to the conservation and sustainable use of biological diversity, taking also into account risks to human health, by providing international rules and procedures in the field of liability and redress relating to living modified organisms.

The United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification

The UAE signed the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) in 1998. The objective of the convention is to combat desertification and mitigate the effects of drought in countries experiencing these issues through effective action at all levels. This involves implementing long-term integrated strategies in affected areas that focus simultaneously on increasing land productivity and the rehabilitation, conservation, and sustainable management of land and water resources, leading to improved living conditions, particularly at the community level.

Convention on Biological Diversity

The UAE signed the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), the first global agreement to cover all aspects of biological diversity – including conservation, sustainable use, and fair and equitable sharing of benefits arising from genetic resources – in 2000. Together with the other signatories, the country works to achieve the CBD's 2050 Vision for Biodiversity: Living in Harmony with Nature.



Ramsar Convention on Wetlands

The Ramsar Convention on Wetlands is an intergovernmental treaty that provides the framework for the conservation and wise use of wetlands and their resources. The UAE signed the convention in 2007 and hosted the 13th Meeting of the Conference of the Contracting Parties to the Ramsar Convention (COP13) in 2018, reinforcing its role as a prime convener and facilitator of biodiversity conservation events.



Ramsar Convention (COP13)

Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety

The UAE signed the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety to the CBD in 2014. The international treaty governs the movements of living modified organisms resulting from modern biotechnology from one country to another that may have adverse effect on the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity. The Protocol seeks to protect biodiversity from the potential risks posed by living modified organisms resulting from modern biotechnology. It establishes an advance informed agreement procedure for ensuring that countries are provided with the information necessary to make informed decisions before agreeing to the import of such organisms into their territory.

Nagoya Protocol on Access and Benefit-sharing

The UAE signed the Nagoya Protocol on Access to Genetic Resources and the Fair and Equitable Sharing of Benefits Arising from their Utilization to the CBD in 2014. The international agreement aims to share the benefits arising from the utilization of genetic resources in a fair and equitable way.

The Nagoya Protocol creates greater legal certainty and transparency for providers as well as users of genetic resources by establishing more predictable conditions for access to these resources and helping ensure benefit-sharing when genetic resources leave the provider country. This way, the Protocol offers incentives to conserve and sustainably use genetic resources, and therefore enhances the contribution of biodiversity to sustainable development and human well-being.

Convention on Migratory Species

The UAE signed the Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals (CMS) in 2018. The UN environmental treaty provides a global platform for the conservation and sustainable use of migratory animals and their habitats. The UAE is home to CMS Secretariat's largest and only regional hub that leads on the CMS Dugong MoU and the CMS Raptors MoU.



Convention on Migratory Species

GCC Wildlife Conservation Convention

To advance regional cooperation in biodiversity conservation, the UAE signed the Convention on the Preservation of Wildlife and Their Natural Habitat in the Countries of the GCC in 2004.

BILATERAL AND MULTILATERAL AGREEMENTS

IUCN

The UAE joined the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), the global authority on the status of the natural world and the measures needed to safeguard it, in 2020. Her Excellency Razan Khalifa Al Mubarak, Managing Director of the Environment Agency – Abu Dhabi (EAD) and the Mohamed bin Zayed Species Conservation Fund, is currently serving as IUCN’s President for the 2021-2025 term, while Her Excellency Dr Shaikha Salem Al Dhaheri, Secretary General of EAD, is holding the post of IUCN’s Regional Councilor for West Asia.

The organization manages the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species, the world’s most comprehensive information source on the global extinction risk status of animal, fungus, and plant species. The UAE launched its National Red List project in 2020.

Its other initiatives include the IUCN Green List of Protected and Conserved Areas that offers locally relevant expert guidance to help achieve fair and effective nature conservation results in protected and conserved areas. In addition, the Important Bird and Biodiversity Areas (IBAs) project, run in partnership with BirdLife International, seeks to identify and protect places of the greatest significance for the conservation of the world’s birds and the wildlife they need to thrive.

IPBES

The UAE is a member of the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES), an independent international body that aims to improve the interface between science and policy on issues of biodiversity & ecosystem services.



High Ambition Coalition for Nature and People

The UAE is a member of the High Ambition Coalition for Nature and People (HAC) that champions global adoption of the 30x30 target – protecting 30 percent of the planet’s land and oceans by 2030. Its other objectives include promoting nature-based climate solutions, increasing public and private financing of protected areas and other conservation measures, as well as supporting the effective management of protected and conserved areas and the rest of the planet.



High Ambition Coalition for Nature and People



Global Ocean Alliance

Global Ocean Alliance

The UAE is a member of the Global Ocean Alliance, formed by the UK in 2019, that aims to protect 30 percent of oceans worldwide through marine protected areas (MPAs) and other effective area-based conservation measures (OECMs) by 2030. The Alliance brings together countries dedicated to marine conservation.

Green Group

Together with Cape Verde, Costa Rica, Iceland, Singapore, and Slovenia, the UAE is a member of the Green Group, an informal forum of foreign ministers united in the cause of highlighting the significance of environmental issues in international relations.

Leaders’ Pledge for Nature

At COP26 in November 2021, the UAE joined the Leaders’ Pledge for Nature that aspires to put nature and biodiversity on a path to recovery by 2030 as part of the UN’s Decade of Action. Endorsed by the European Commission and 92 countries, the Pledge commits its signatories to urgent and transformational actions aimed at addressing biodiversity loss,

safeguarding the planet, and working collaboratively to achieve positive outcomes for nature, climate, and sustainable development. It highlights increasing the protection of the planet’s land and oceans through effectively managed protected areas as one of the actions to achieve these goals.

Glasgow Leaders’ Declaration on Forests and Land Use

At COP26 in November 2021, the UAE joined the Glasgow Leaders’ Declaration on Forests and Land Use that seeks to halt and reverse forest loss and land degradation by 2030 while advancing sustainable development and promoting an inclusive rural transformation. Endorsed by 90+ countries, the Declaration aims to accelerate the global transition to sustainable land use.



Leaders’ Pledge for Nature - COP26

UAE'S GLOBAL WILDLIFE CONSERVATION

The UAE has a proven track record of developing and implementing effective breeding and reintroduction programs to protect endangered species, such as houbara bustard, falcons, Arabian leopard, sand cat, Arabian oryx, and Arabian tahr.

Our International Fund for Houbara Conservation (IFHC) is one of the largest species conservation projects in the world that seeks to restore sustainable numbers of houbara bustards in the UAE and other range countries. To date, the program has bred almost 630,000 houbaras and released more than 487,000 into the wild.

Meanwhile, the Sheikh Mohamed Bin Zayed Arabian Oryx Reintroduction Programme releases hundreds of oryxes into protected areas every year. We succeeded in bringing the beautiful antelope back from the brink of extinction, and today, the UAE is home to 7,500 of these stunning creatures.

On a global scale, the Mohamed bin Zayed Species Conservation Fund has

allocated over US\$22 million to support the conservation of more than 1,500 endangered species in 160 countries. It is also responsible for local conservation initiatives, such as the resoundingly successful Dugong and Seagrass Conservation Project.

In addition, the US\$20 million Mohamed Bin Zayed Raptor Conservation Fund facilitates research and finances global programs dedicated to the conservation and restoration of birds of prey and their habitats. The Fund launched a pilot project in Mongolia aimed at encouraging electricity companies and relevant authorities to remodel the existing powerlines to prevent the electrocution of saker falcons and other birds.

The UAE President His Highness Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan is also the patron of the Global Alliance for Wild Cats that includes China, India, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and the US, who have each pledged US\$20 million over 10 years to wild cat conservation — the cornerstone of a US\$200-million campaign to save the world's wild cats.



Coral Reef

UAE'S LEGISLATION & POLICIES

The UAE has become one of the first countries that have enacted local legislation to ensure CITES implementation with the issue of the Federal Law No. 11 of 2002 regarding the regulation and control of international trade in endangered species of wild fauna and flora.

The UAE issued the Federal Law No. 9 of 2020 on biosafety of genetically modified organisms and the Cabinet Resolution No. 84 on the By-Law of the Federal Law No. 9 of 2020 on biosafety of genetically modified organisms and their products. The law and its by-law seek to safeguard human health, local genetic resources, and biodiversity, in addition to mitigating relevant risks. They also aim to protect the environment during developing, manufacturing, producing, transporting, or handling genetically modified organisms and their products.

Due to the continuous use of genetic resources across multiple sectors, there is a need to preserve them and protect related customs and traditions, as well as to organize access to various types of such resources. In line with the Nagoya Protocol, the UAE issued the Federal Law No. 8 of 2021 on the access to genetic resources and the fair and equitable sharing of benefits arising from their utilization. The law comprises 17 articles that seek to protect and maintain genetic resources, limit their depletion, and regulate access and use to help sustain the country's biological diversity.

The National Strategy to Combat Desertification focuses on preserving terrestrial ecosystems, mitigating the effects of desertification, and preventing and reversing land degradation.

Legislation that ensures the sustainability

of the country's marine environment includes the Federal Law No. 23 of 1999 concerning the exploitation, protection, and development of living aquatic resources in the UAE, the Ministerial Resolution No. 43 of 2019 regulating shark fishing and trade, and the Ministerial Decision No. 501 of 2015 regulating the fishing and trade of Arabian safi and sheri. Meanwhile, the UAE National Framework Statement for Sustainable Fisheries (2019-2030) provides guidance on achieving sustainable fisheries within this decade.

The UAE National Plan of Action for the Conservation and Management of Sharks serves as a framework for conserving the UAE's sharks and rays, while the National Plan of Action for the Conservation of Marine Turtles in the UAE seeks to protect marine turtles and their habitats in the country's waters.

Finally, the National Invasive Species Strategy and Action Plan aims to preserve biodiversity by controlling the spread of invasive species and minimizing their impact on the UAE's ecosystems.

National Biodiversity Strategy

The UAE's biodiversity and ecosystem conservation efforts are guided by the National Biodiversity Strategy. It focuses on restoring biodiversity through rehabilitating degraded habitats, mitigating the pressure on sensitive ecosystems, and educating decision makers and the public about the importance of ecosystem services to the community's well-being.

We are currently updating the strategy to factor in the latest developments related to environmental challenges and the means to address them.



Arabian Oryx

UAE'S EFFORTS

Protected Areas

The UAE has 33 terrestrial protected areas that account for over 18 percent of its land territory, and 16 marine protected areas that account for 12 percent of its marine and coastal territory, achieving Aichi Target 11 on both counts.

Several of the country's protected areas have received international recognition. These include 10 Wetlands of International Importance (Ramsar sites), two UNESCO Biosphere Reserves, five Ecologically or Biologically Significant Marine Areas, and one site on the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Green List of Protected and Conserved Areas.

In partnership with BirdLife International, we also identified 30 Important Bird and Biodiversity Areas (IBAs) in the UAE that are home to 291 bird species.

Terrestrial Ecosystems

The UAE has a strong track record in combating desertification and land degradation.

We are using modern technologies and innovative solutions, including leveraging drones to map agricultural areas and sow tree seeds to reduce sand encroachment. To date, drones have helped disperse 6 million acacia seeds and 250,000 ghaf seeds across 25 sites nationwide.

We are establishing the Abu Dhabi Plant Genetic Resources Centre (Gene Bank) that will be the largest in the region with a capacity to store 20,000 samples once completed in 2022.

We are updating the National Strategy to Combat Desertification that focuses on preserving ecosystems and mitigating the effects of desertification.

We are also working on the UAE Smart Map of Natural Capital using remote sensing that will inform policies and decision-making on land use, investment, and business improvement in line with the country's economic vision and the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Marine Ecosystems

We are committed to conserving our marine life, with the most vulnerable groups – turtles and marine mammals – protected by law.

To preserve some of our key endangered species, we launched two national action plans – one for the conservation and management of the shark and ray species recorded in the country, and the other for the conservation of marine turtles and their habitats in our territorial waters.

And to ensure the sustainability of our fish stocks, we have introduced fishing and trade bans on certain fish species during their breeding seasons. We are working closely with fishermen to help them understand the importance of complying with the ban to allow the fish to replenish their numbers.

Our country is home to 60 million mangroves that form forests spanning 183 sq km and capture 43,000 tons of CO2 annually. Mangrove forests protect coasts from rising sea levels and storm surges, provide critical habitats for biodiversity, and serve as powerful carbon sinks.

We work closely with NGOs and the private sector to fulfil our commitment to safeguarding the sustainability of our mangrove forests. A prime example of such collaboration is the Dubai Mangrove Forest, an initiative of Emirates Marine Environmental Group (EMEG) sponsored by P&G.

At COP26 in November 2021, we announced an increase in our mangrove-planting target from 30 million, as included in our second NDC, to 100 million by 2030. With the additional mangroves planted, the UAE's mangrove forests will cover 483 sq km and sequester nearly 115,000 tons of CO2 per year. The move consolidates the nation's position as a global leader in nature-based climate change solutions.



Al Zorah Natural Reserve - Ajman, UAE

Protected Areas

49

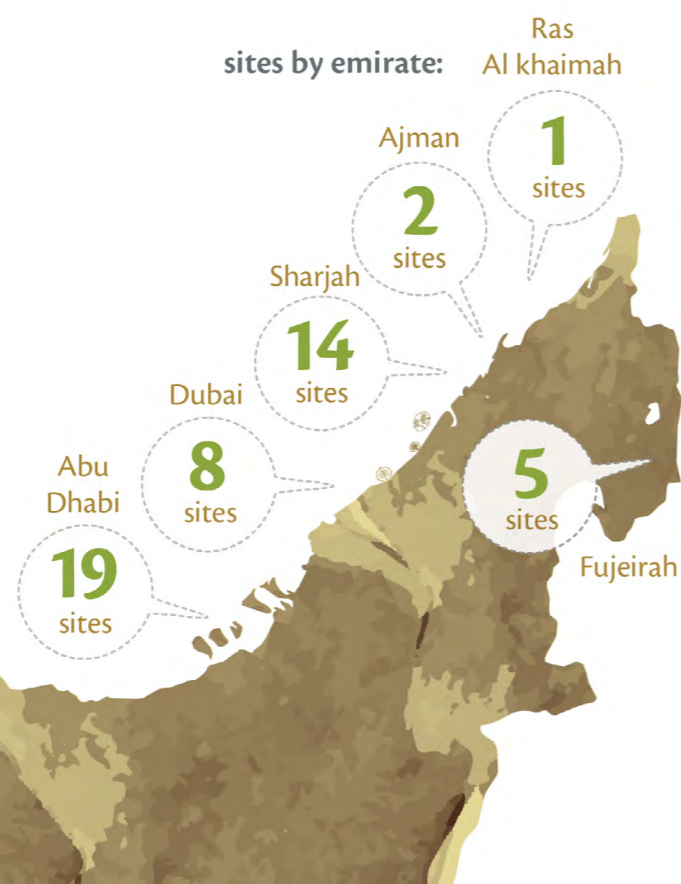
Protected Areas



16
Marine Areas



33
Terrestrial Areas



Mangrove Alliance for Climate

The UAE has joined forces with Indonesia to launch the Mangrove Alliance for Climate (MAC), a global partnership of governments, organizations, businesses, and academia that recognize the importance of mangroves as an effective nature-based climate change solution. It aims to scale up the conservation and restoration of mangrove ecosystems worldwide with an ambitious collective target of planting more mangroves by 2030.

Corals

In terms of coral conservation, we have deployed more than 5,000 artificial reefs across various locations, and are building the world's largest coral nursery that will span around 300,000 square meters and will be home to 1.5 million corals.

We have also launched the Super Coral Project that brings various species of corals from their natural habitats and exposes them to extreme conditions with the aim of activating formerly idle genes that can help them cope with climate change. In addition, we have developed an innovative micro-fragmentation and fusion method that accelerates the growth of corals, which is normally slow in the wild.

Biodiversity Assessment

The UAE is at the forefront of countries that have committed to protecting endangered species of flora and fauna included on the Red List. In 2020, we took a major step in assessing the status of local biodiversity by launching the UAE National Red List project that evaluates the risk of extinction for 1,167 species in the UAE and identifies endangered species. Its outcomes, first published in March 2022,

help measure the effectiveness of current conservation policies and inform future efforts in this space in a bid to achieve the UN Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 14: Life Below Water and SDG 15: Life on Land by 2030.

Research shows that 58 native species of mammals are found in the UAE, 39 of which are terrestrial and 19 are marine. Carnivores constitute 28.2 percent, rodents 20.5 percent, and bats 30.7 percent of the confirmed native species. There are 18 registered species of cetaceans and one species of sirenians – dugong. The Arabian Gulf has the second-largest population of dugongs in the world after Australia, which is predominately found in the UAE. In addition, there are at least 19 species of marine mammals, including the Indian Ocean humpback dolphin. Studies indicate that the country has the largest concentration of this species in the world.

The UAE is home to the Arabia tahr, which is endemic to the Hajar Mountains of UAE and Oman, and five species of mammals that are endemic to the Arabian Peninsula – the Arabian oryx, the Arabian gazelle, the Arabian sand gazelle, the Wagner's gerbil, and the Arabian jird. The study showed the extinction of three species of mammals in the wild – the Arabian wolf, the Arabian leopard, and the striped hyena.

The UAE is home to 72 species of herpetofauna. These comprise 57 terrestrial reptile species, including one endemic species (the leaf-toed gecko), eight species of sea snakes, and five species of sea turtles, in addition to two amphibian species – frogs that live in the valleys.

The UAE has 459 bird species, 167 of which were evaluated. Birds in the country are divided into two groups – those that are regularly occurring and those that are resident.

The UAE's marine waters provide habitats for nearly 80 species of cartilaginous fishes, including 54 species of sharks and 26 species of stingrays.

In addition, the country is home to 66 species of corals that have all been assessed, along with 126 species of bony fishes of economic importance.

The UAE has recorded more than 945 species of vascular plants, 598 of which are native.

According to the UAE National Red List project, 53 percent of bird species, 46.7 percent of mammal species, 19 percent of reptile species, and eight percent of plant species in the UAE are endangered. Distribution maps for endangered species were developed to devise conservation plans and programs for these species and their natural habitats.

In addition, our National Invasive Species Project examines invasive species and their pathways within the country, and develops management action plans to prevent their spread in coordination with the International Union for Conservation of Nature.

Ecotourism

The UN defines ecotourism as a kind of sustainable tourism that contributes to the preservation of natural and cultural heritage. Over the past two decades, the concept of ecotourism has evolved significantly, targeting travelers looking for

tours with a minimal negative impact on the environment. According to international studies, ecotourism currently accounts for over 20 percent of total tourism activities around the world. The significance of ecotourism lies in its environmental benefits, as it focuses on environmental protection, eco-friendliness, and environmental sustainability. In addition, it helps preserve biodiversity, accelerates the transition to a green economy, minimizes desertification and pollution, and contributes to the national GDP.

To capitalize on our significant environmental assets, we introduced the national project 'The UAE's Natural Wonders' in 2018 to promote ecotourism across the seven emirates and position the country as a leading ecotourism hub. To help visitors navigate our many ecotourism attractions, we launched the Eco Tourism UAE app, microsite, and e-book, which is accessible to the public here: <https://www.moccae.gov.ae/assets/5c47fcf6/uaes-natural-wonders.aspx>

Public Awareness

To raise public awareness and improve attitudes towards diverse environmental issues, we are implementing our National Strategy for Environmental Awareness and Education through organizing a variety of programs and campaigns targeting the community, such as desert and beach cleanup drives.



Arabian Leopard

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For further information or feedback:

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