

Arabian Oryx Returns to the Wild

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January 31, 1982 was a milestone in the long struggle to save *Oryx leucoryx* from extinction in the wild. On that day ten Arabian oryx, nine of them born and bred in the United States, were released into the open desert in Oman. The release was a triumph for Operation Oryx, launched almost 20 years earlier, in April 1962, by the Fauna Preservation Society, as it then was; in Oman it was also a day of rejoicing for the Harasis tribe, who will once again guard their white oryx in the Jidda al Harasis, and for Sultan Qaboos bin Said, whose generous support and cooperation made the return possible.

The story begins in 1959 when Lee Talbot made a survey of endangered Asian mammals, published in *Oryx*, May 1960, as *A Look at Threatened Species*. The Arabian oryx, he wrote, was reduced to between 100 and 200 animals in the extreme south of the great Rub al Khali desert in southern Arabia, where they were hunted every year, mainly by Arab princes in motor vehicles. Within a few years, he feared they would be totally exterminated. In captivity there were only a handful and the only breeding unit was at Riyadh Zoo in Saudi Arabia.

The next year, in April 1961, *Oryx* announced: 'Very bad news has reached the Society of an attack on what we fear to be the last remaining population of the Arabian oryx. A raiding party from Qatar, on the Persian Gulf, entered the Eastern Aden Protectorate with motor vehicles in January 1961, and shot at least 28 oryx'. The Society immediately resolved, jointly with IUCN's Survival Service Commission (SSC) – whose chairman was the FPS Secretary, Lt Col C.L. Boyle – to mount an expedition to capture some of the surviving oryx and breed them in captivity in a reserve. Operation Oryx was soon under way – master-minded by the FPS and Leofric Boyle, ably led by Major Ian Grimwood, then Chief Game Warden of Kenya, now an FPS Vice-President and winner of the 1977 Getty Prize, funded mainly by the World Wildlife Fund and the London *Daily Mail*, and aided by a host of organizations, including the Royal Air Force, and many individuals.

As firmer information came in, it was learned that the raiding Qataris had stayed in the Ramlat Mitán area for several weeks and had in fact killed at least 48 oryx. Whereas a bedouin hunter might take a fortnight to trail and kill one animal, a motorized party, once they had crossed a line of fresh spoor, have only to follow it until they sight the oryx, and a chase to the death is an almost foregone conclusion.

Operation Oryx Sets Out

In August the final decision to go ahead with Operation Oryx was made at a meeting in the FPS offices. The expedition members, in addition to the leader, Ian Grimwood, were Michael Crouch, Assistant Adviser, Northern Deserts, Eastern Aden Protectorate, deputy leader; G.K. Gracie, pilot of the light aircraft loaned by the East African Wildlife Society; Captain G.A. Shepherd of the Aden Protectorate's Armoured Car Squadron; D.R.M. Stewart, biologist of the Kenya Game Department; P.W.J. Whitehead, a former game ranger with African

experience; and veterinarian Michael Woodford, later a member of FPS Council and currently working for FAO. But in February 1962, while equipment was being prepared and experimental capture techniques tried out on beisa oryx in Kenya, news came that in December the Qataris had returned and killed another 16 oryx, or, as a later message put it, 'killed the lot'. Some backers withdrew, understandably nervous that their money would be wasted on a wild oryx chase. FPS, however, reinforced by generous help from the new-born World Wildlife Fund, went ahead and launched its advance party from Nairobi on 22 March. A month later, on 23 April, the expedition set out from Aden (now in South Yemen).

The area to be searched for oryx was a rough quadrilateral of sand and gravel plains of some 8000 sq miles to the north-east of Sanau, the last outpost for water. At first the only tracks they saw were those of the Qatari raiders, but on 3 May they came on new oryx tracks and two days later they caught their first animal. By 21 May, however, they had captured only three more – two more had been caught but had got away into the soft sand sea, where the vehicles could not follow. Altogether, the expedition believed that only 11 animals had survived the second Qatari raid in that area, five of which had made their escape into neighbouring Oman. Of the four captured, three were males, one of which died in the process of capture, probably from the effects of an old gunshot wound, aggravated by the chase. The female and two males were flown to Isiolo, for a six months' quarantine in quarters made available by the Kenya Game Department. They were named Pat, Edith and Tomatum after Lt Col J.W.G. Gray, Commandant of the Hadrami Beduin Legion, who had greatly aided the expedition, Mrs Gray and Tomatum bin Harbi, one of the senior Arab guides.

Three Oryx Captured Just in Time

The first stage of Operation Oryx was thus only partially successful. Probably all the animals remaining within its area of operations had been caught, but three animals were not a viable breeding unit.

The destination of the captives had been a difficult problem. Nowhere in their natural range was there a reserve or national park where Arabian oryx could be safely released, and so, with some reluctance, the FPS, with IUCN and WWF, had opted for a zoo, and had accepted the offer of the newly founded Maytag Zoo at Phoenix, Arizona, where the climate was similar to that of Arabia. The three oryx were airlifted via Nairobi and London to the Clifton quarantine station in New Jersey – only just in time, for five days after they left Isiolo Somali secession riots broke out, and the police had a battle in the area of the oryx holding pens. Finally on 24 June they were taken by the 161st Air Transport Group, Arizona National Guard, on to what, on the sudden death of Harold Maytag, soon became the Arizona Zoological Society's zoo at Phoenix, then in charge of Robert H. Mattlin. At this point the World Herd of Arabian oryx came into existence. On 26 October 1963, a calf was born to Edith, sired by Tomatum and named Ian after the expedition's leader.

World Herd Increases

Meanwhile the search for some captive oryx to add to the herd had scored two successes: London Zoo presented the World Herd with their young female, Caroline, named after Caroline Jarvis, then Editor of the *International Zoo Year-*

book, now Countess of Cranbrook; and the ruler of Kuwait, HH Sheikh Jaber Abdullah al Sabah, offered the FPS two females from his private collection. Only one of these, Salwa, materialized, the other having died giving birth to a calf (sired by a beisa oryx) before it could be sent. However, Ian Grimwood's negotiations with Saudi Arabia were most successful. From his personal collection of eight males and five females HM King Saud presented two pairs to WWF, and in July 1964 these four joined the three captured animals and the calf Ian at Phoenix. A second calf was born to Caroline on 22 May 1964, also sired by Tomatum; the third born in December 1964, came from the Saudi Arabian additions to the herd.

The World Herd was in the care of a body of five Trustees, all of whom had contributed, financially or otherwise, towards the successful conclusion of the operation: the Arizona Zoological Society, the FPS, the Shikar-Safari Club of California (which through the late Maurice Machris contributed a substantial part of the transport costs), WWF-US, and the Zoological Society of London. Those mainly responsible for the welfare of the oryx at Phoenix over the years have been Earl Bimson, Chairman, Jack Tinker, Zoo Director, and Wayne Homan, Curator. The FPS undertook the maintenance of the official *Arabian Oryx Studbook*, later taken over by the San Diego Zoological Society. In 1979 the studbook recorded 159 males and 163 females, 48 calves having been born during the year.

The basis on which 'ownership' of the World Herd animals was originally decided was that the first calf born to each female went to the owner of the dam, the second to the owner of the sire, and the third to the Arizona Zoological Society. However, in due course all except the AZS agreed to pool their 'ownership'.

First Female Calf Born

The first seven calves born at Phoenix were all males. It was not until September 1966 that the first female was born and the Trustees of the World Herd could begin to think about setting up other breeding groups and returning animals to the wild. There was already one other breeding group, at Riyadh Zoo, but this in fact soon became a source of potential embarrassment. In 1965 a Dutch animal dealer persuaded Riyadh Zoo, which only had two breeding females, to part with a breeding pair in exchange for other animals. While in quarantine at Naples, the female gave birth to a female calf, and the three were sold to Los Angeles Zoo for what was then a very high price. Both FPS and the SSC were unhappy at such an extremely rare animal being offered on the world market at a price which could only tempt others to capture further animals for private gain rather than the good of the species. However, the three animals became the basis of the Los Angeles Zoo's thriving herd, which ironically at first managed to produce nearly as long a run of female calves as Phoenix had done of males. Eventually this imbalance became the basis of an exchange between the two herds, a Phoenix male being exchanged for a Los Angeles female in 1971, following a visit to Los Angeles by Lord Willingdon, President of the FPS.

World Herd Dispersed

By the autumn of 1972 World Herd numbers had increased to 34, and it was thought the process of dispersal should be started, if only to avoid epidemic disease, always a danger to a single herd. Six animals were therefore sent on loan

from Phoenix to the San Diego Zoological Society's Wild Animal Park at Escondido, California, and were later joined by all the remaining animals not 'owned' by the AZS. The San Diego Zoological Society became a Trustee of the World Herd. In 1976 four animals were sent to Brownsville Zoo, Texas, on the same basis as to San Diego.

Three years later, at the time of the Third World Conference on Breeding Endangered Species in Captivity, held in San Diego, the Trustees of the World Herd decided to wind up the existing arrangements. The remaining animals were allocated to the zoos which held them, including for the first time four European zoos: East Berlin, Hamburg, Rotterdam and Zürich. These four agreed to supply their first offspring to the Zoological Society of London, in order to circumvent the veterinary cordon which, because of bluetongue in North America, had hitherto prevented that Society receiving any oryx from the World Herd. At the same time all the zoos with Arabian oryx stemming from the World Herd agreed to supply any animals that might be needed for reintroduction into the wild.

Sheikh Turns to Captive Breeding

Meanwhile, in the Arabian peninsula, Operation Oryx had drawn attention to the idea of keeping captive breeding herds, and Sheikh Qassim bin Hamad Al Thani, a member of the ruling family of Qatar and his country's Minister of Education, pursued it with vigour. On his almost annual expeditions to southern Arabia, he began to capture instead of kill oryx and take them back the 500km journey across the desert to Qatar, each animal, he once assured an anxious inquirer in the early days, in the back of its own Cadillac. His herd of 30-40 bred well at his estate in the desert about 80 miles north of Doha. Unfortunately, he kept them all in a single enclosure, at first along with gazelles, and periodically they were subject to epidemic disease. This kept numbers down to under 40, but the Sheikh was evidently so fond of being able to look at all his herd together that he could never bring himself to accept the frequent veterinary advice to split them up. He died in 1976, and three years later 32 of his herd were still on his property. Some may perhaps end up in a fine zoo which is being planned in Qatar with the aid of the Zoological Society of London. The Ruler of Qatar has four oryx herds on his farms, and at least a dozen other sheikhs in the Gulf states, especially in Abu Dhabi and Dubai, shared Sheikh Qassim's hobby, as he liked to call it. Today there are probably just as many captive oryx in Arabia as there are in the United States, between 80 and 100 in each case.

It is fortunate that there are so many animals in captivity, because the Arabian oryx has probably been exterminated in the wild since 1972. Operation Oryx was thus fully justified, but at the same time it may have stimulated further efforts at capture by other sheikhs than Qassim, and so have led to the very extinction in the wild which it was aimed at insuring against. At the end of 1962 a few hundred oryx had been known to survive in the Jiddat al Harasis area of south-western Oman, and some much smaller numbers were scattered to the east of the Rub al Khali desert. The Harasis animals were pillaged to form the basis of the herds that grew up at Qatar, Abu Dhabi and elsewhere along the Gulf, despite the fact that this was poaching in Oman where they were protected; the story of the destruction of what appears to have been the last viable herd in Oman was told in *Oryx*, February 1974, by D.S. Henderson. In October 1972, on a photographic safari in the Harasis area, Henderson came

across three dead oryx and the graphic evidence in the sand of the chasing and capture of four more. There is reason to suppose that the raiders came from Abu Dhabi. Since that date nobody has reported a live wild Arabian oryx from Oman, nor has any firm evidence of any surviving in the wild anywhere in the Arabian peninsula reached either the SSC or the FPS. The original stock of the white oryx appears to be extinct in the wild.

The original aim of Operation Oryx was to return a breeding stock to the wild, and in the early days, it was hoped that Jordan, which had scheduled national parks in two suitable areas, Azraq and Wadi Rum, might be the place where this could be done. Unfortunately both reserves are near the Saudi Arabian frontier and the risk was too great. However, in February 1978 the Trustees of the World Herd sent four male animals to Jordan, to be kept in the 22 sq km fenced Shaumari Reserve at Azraq, and these, together with four females from Qatar, have established themselves as another captive breeding herd. Also in 1978 Los Angeles Zoo sold four pairs of Arabian oryx to Israel to found another captive breeding herd at the Hai Bar reserve.

Oryx Gets Total Protection in Oman

The breakthrough came in Oman, where the young Sultan Qaboos bin Said was keenly interested in conserving his country's wildlife. In 1976 the Ministry of Diwan Affairs decreed the oryx's total protection and Ralph Daly, the Sultan's conservation adviser, and his Omani colleagues set about planning the return of animals that could be released in the Jiddat al Harasis where the last wild oryx had been seen. Here the Harasis people were anxious to see the oryx restored and prepared to guard them. Advice was sought from WWF, and the project director, Dr Hartmut Jungius, paid two visits. Holding pens were built and Dr Mark Stanley Price, an Oxford zoologist experienced in the care of beisa oryx in Kenya, was appointed manager. In 1980 San Diego Zoo sent ten oryx by air, and in 1981 four more; the first calf was born in the pens in May 1981. In November five of the herd were immobilized by Dr Michael Woodford, the veterinarian of Operation Oryx, and radio-collared, so that their movements could be followed after release; two of the collars were solar-powered. By the end of January Dr Stanley Price and his Harasis helpers believed that the oryx could be released. They had developed a stable social structure while in the pens; each animal had a fixed position in a hierarchy, and they moved as a group. So on 31 January 1982 the gates were opened. At first the oryx stayed near the pens; as there had been no significant rain for six years so that there was little grazing, hay had to be put out. But torrential rain three weeks later brought new grass and the oryx lost all interest in hay. A calf was born in March and at the end of the month all 11 animals were in good condition.

Pumas in National Park to be Killed

The National Park Service have agreed to the killing of pumas (cougars) *Felis concolor* in Carlsbad Caverns National Park in New Mexico following sheep ranchers' complaints that they destroy large numbers of sheep. Now residents adjacent to other parks may also seek permission to kill predators, and with such a precedent the NPS may find it difficult to refuse.