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Why the United Arab Emirates Is a Poor Choice for a Global Climate Summit

Teaser: The UAE is destroying the ecosystem of a UNESCO World Heritage Site, and yet its oil company chief will preside over COP28.

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[Article Body:]

It is no joke; the man who will preside over the upcoming climate summit, [COP28](#) (which will take place in Dubai, United Arab Emirates (UAE), from November 30 to December 12), is the [chief oil executive](#) of the Abu Dhabi National Oil Company (ADNOC), the [third largest](#) oil company in the Arabian Peninsula: Sultan Ahmed Al Jaber, who also is the United Arab Emirates Minister for Industry and Advanced Technology.

Organizations and [lawmakers](#), including a group of [133 U.S. senators and European Union lawmakers](#) concerned with environmental damage, climate change, and [human rights](#) advocates, have denounced the conflict of interest inherent in having the head of an oil company preside over the major international climate change summit that aims to reduce fossil fuel emissions. Meanwhile, in 2022, ADNOC announced [plans](#) for new drilling, which, if realized, would represent the second-largest expansion of oil and gas production globally.

The Socotra Archipelago

The Socotra archipelago in the Republic of Yemen consists of four islands (Socotra, Abd al-Kuri, Darsa, and Samha) and two rock islets. Lying 200 miles from the mainland coast of Yemen, it is situated strategically in the Arabian Sea, the northwestern part of the Indian Ocean, and east of the Gulf of Aden and the Red Sea—the two bodies of water that link the Mediterranean Sea to South Asia and the Far East. Thus, it is along a crucial maritime route that makes trade between East and West economically viable. An estimated [20,000](#) shipping vessels pass around Socotra annually, carrying 9 percent of the world’s oil supply.

Socotra Island, the largest island, represents around [95 percent](#) of the landmass of the Socotra archipelago. [Thirty-seven percent of its 825 plants](#) are native to the island. Socotra also hosts more than [190](#) bird species, [and 90 percent](#) of its reptile species are endemic to the archipelago. [Ninety-five percent](#) of its land snail species are only found on the archipelago. Its diverse marine life includes [253 reef-building corals and 730 coastal fish species](#). The human inhabitants of the archipelago, dwelling mainly on the Socotra and Abdul al-Kuri islands, lead a simple way of life, depending primarily on herding or fishing for their livelihoods.

All component areas of Socotra have been granted [legal environmental protection](#) by UNESCO. It is recognized as one of the world's [five most biodiverse islands](#) with an [Outstanding Universal Value](#) due to its [unique flora and fauna](#). In 2008, Socotra was designated as a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

Illegal Occupation and Overexploitation

In 2015, two cyclones struck Socotra, causing severe human, environmental, and infrastructural damage, and signaling the archipelago's vulnerability to climate change. The UAE sent humanitarian aid to Socotra, [repaired](#) schools, hospitals, housing, roads, and water systems, and set up health centers.

The World Heritage Committee (WHC) expressed [concern](#) about the damage caused by the cyclones and the repairs that needed to be undertaken and requested the Yemen Environment Protection Authority (EPA) to ensure the repairs abide by the [World Heritage Operational Guidelines](#), the road network not be expanded, and the restoration of the damaged seaport be limited to its previous state.

At first, the inhabitants of Socotra appreciated the UAE's assistance. Yet, gradually, they began to observe that the UAE, a key member in the Saudi-led coalition war on Yemen, was expanding its military presence in Socotra. UAE officials started to visit the island frequently. Military cargo planes [arrived](#) with tanks, armored vehicles, and troops, although Socotra was not involved in the war.

The UAE likewise expanded the island's only airport at the capital city, Hadibo, built military bases and camps and installed several [telecommunication towers](#) and two signal intelligence systems (SIGINT). These activities violate Yemeni sovereignty under international law and the 1972 World Heritage Convention.

It also became evident that the UAE was entrenching its control in Socotra through its proxy, the Southern Transitional Council (STC). A secessionist group demanding independence of the southern governorates from the north, the STC is funded and supported militarily by the UAE. The head of the STC, Aidarous Al Zubaidi, resides in Abu Dhabi.

The UAE authorities sacked the governor of Socotra and the EPA chairman, replacing them with individuals loyal to the Emirates. They also replaced Yemeni soldiers guarding the airport and seaport with UAE soldiers, assigned a UAE representative to the island, and [substituted](#) UAE flags with those of the Republic of Yemen. In 2019, the U.S. government sent troops to install a [Patriot missile system in](#) Socotra at the request of the UAE.

The UAE's ambition in the occupation of Socotra is to dominate the surrounding strategic maritime shipping routes, establish an [intelligence hub](#), and develop a tourism industry on the island.

The UAE has dramatically ruptured the way of life for the islands' inhabitants. For example, at Abd al-Kuri island, residents living on the island were forcefully deported in 2022 to establish [a UAE military base](#)—a violation of international humanitarian law and [a war crime](#). In Socotra, which has a population of [60,000](#), the UAE has encouraged inhabitants to sell their homes, promising the owners residency and work permits in the UAE, along with a better quality of life.

A visitor who wishes to remain anonymous because of security concerns and who is familiar with Socotra explained that residents are dismayed by foreign occupiers disrupting their natural heritage and militarizing the island. The population of Hadibo has swollen due to an influx of Yemeni refugees fleeing the war and as a result of Indian and Pakistani laborers brought in by the UAE to work on their construction projects. Hadibo itself has been transformed by the construction of concrete and cement buildings without regard for traditional building practices and without the necessary infrastructure to support the growing population, such as adequate waste management.

Inhabitants often [demonstrate against the UAE](#) occupation. Many of them have been jailed in “[unofficial detention facilities](#)” operated by the UAE on the island. They have also lodged complaints [with the Yemeni government](#), which is in de facto exile in Riyadh, concerning the UAE's looting and destroying the island's natural resources, notably uprooting rare plants and trees, capturing rare birds for export and sale in the UAE, and removing ancient stones from [archaeological sites and settlements](#).

In response, Saudi forces arrived in Socotra in 2018 to curtail UAE aggression. Like the UAE, they disregarded the World Heritage Operational Guidelines, building their telecommunication tower and a military base and converting the EPA office into [their headquarters](#). Tensions over Socotra remain between [the Saudi-led coalition partners](#).

Accelerating Climate Change and Biodiversity Destruction

Environmental destruction entails [two intertwined processes](#): climate change and the destruction of biodiversity, which mutually reinforce each other. Climate change is not the lead driver of biodiversity loss; it is human overexploitation and habitat destruction. Protecting biodiversity helps to safeguard against climate change. In the case of the United Arab Emirates, activists, parliamentarians, and the press have highlighted climate change while ignoring biodiversity loss.

As noted, the UAE is responsible for destroying the biodiversity of a UNESCO World Heritage Site: the Socotra archipelago.

The UAE claims that its activities constitute long-term development projects, mainly under the Khalifa Bin Zayed Al Nahyan Foundation; however, these actions infringe on the international legal status of Socotra as a World Heritage Site and its conservation zoning plan. Paragraph 98 of the Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention [states](#): “Legislative and regulatory measures at national and local levels should assure the protection of the property from social, economic, and other pressures or changes that might negatively impact the Outstanding Universal Value, including the integrity and/or authenticity of the property.”

Moreover, these activities, such as the increased burning of fossil fuels to supply electricity for lighting, appliances, and air conditioning in newly built military, residential, and commercial buildings, accelerate Socotra’s vulnerability to climate change.

Uprooting trees release carbon dioxide that they store. The increasing number of cars, trucks, ships, and planes resulting from the UAE’s push to exploit the island commercially is causing a surge in greenhouse gas emissions, mainly carbon dioxide.

Climate change in the archipelago is already manifested in cyclones, the rise of average temperatures, drought escalating water shortages, uprooting rare trees, and the reduction of crop production for humans and animals, all of which the UAE is exacerbating.

Similarly, the UAE’s activities risk the biodiversity of sea life along the coastline and the surrounding seas of the archipelago. Oval coral stones from the coastline and red granite from the wadis (valleys) are used to construct walls around plots of land purchased on the coast by investors from the Gulf states, according to a resident. Such activities ignore the conservation zoning plan, damage the landscape, and threaten soil erosion on the coastline and wadis during the rainy season.

In contempt of WHC specifications, the UAE has expanded the seaport at Hadibo to receive warships delivering arms to the island and [commercial fishing](#) ships to load large amounts of catch for sale internationally and marketed as fish from the UAE. At the same time, UAE authorities have prohibited local fishermen from fishing near the seaport, denying them a livelihood.

The occupiers have also imported plants, which often carry alien invasive species and use pesticides despite [WHC’s warnings](#) that such actions threaten Socotra’s biodiversity. According to the Socotra UN Zoning Plan, 2000, Article 10: “Importing seeds, seedlings, pesticides, or fertilizers into the Socotra islands is prohibited unless the responsible

authorities have conducted the necessary analysis and examination and issued permits in coordination with the council.”

The UAE is also bulldozing land for tourism, marketing Socotra as an adventure vacation site for tourists on visas [issued](#) by the UAE while facilitating flights from Abu Dhabi.

It Is No Joke

The UAE is destroying one of the most biodiverse archipelagos globally and accelerating climate change. Yet, it is the country responsible for hosting the UN COP28, with its top oil executive presiding over the climate summit.

World leaders and the UN look the other way, enabling the UAE to pursue its international violations with impunity. Climate activists and environmental organizations are ignoring an urgent biodiversity catastrophe because they are so narrowly focused on fossil fuel emissions.

Similarly, mainstream media see no obligation to report the UAE’s destruction of a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

Riddled with controversy, COP28 is at a crossroads; it can either restore its credibility by exposing major environmental violations, such as those of the UAE in the Socotra archipelago, and adopt a more holistic approach that includes protecting biodiversity, or continue on a downward spiral.