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## *The United Arab Emirates is destroying the biodiversity of a Yemeni archipelago.*



Photograph Source: Socotra satview – Public Domain

Environmental destruction entails two intertwined processes: climate change and the destruction of biodiversity, which mutually reinforce each other. Both are human-caused. Climate change is not the lead driver of biodiversity loss; it is human overexploitation of natural resources and habitat destruction.

Protecting biodiversity protects against climate change. Nowhere is the fragile nature of biodiversity better illustrated than the archipelago of Socotra in the Republic of Yemen, designated as a UNESCO World Heritage Nature Site in 2008.

### **Socotra: An Outpost of Biodiversity**

The Socotra archipelago consists of four islands (Socotra, Abd al-Kuri, Darsa, Samha) and two rock islets. Lying 200 miles from the mainland coast of Yemen, 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. Thirty-seven percent of its 825 plants are native to the island; Socotra hosts 11 unique bird species; 90 percent of its reptile species and 95 percent of its land snail species are found only on the archipelago; its diverse marine life includes 253 reef-building corals and 730 species of coastal fish. All component areas of Socotra have been granted legal environmental protection on both land and surrounding sea by the World Heritage Committee (WHC).

Inhabitants of the archipelago, dwelling mainly on the Abdul al-Kuri and Socotra islands, have led a simple way of life, depending primarily on herding or fishing for their livelihood.

Socotra is already threatened by climate change, as evident from droughts impacting its rare biodiversity and the two cyclones in 2015 causing severe human, environmental, and infrastructural damage. The recovery effort after the cyclones was spearheaded by the United Arab Emirates (UAE). The desperately needed assistance proved, however, to be a dual-edged sword.

### **The Rescuer With Ulterior Motives**

The UAE sent humanitarian aid to Socotra, repaired schools, hospitals, housing, roads, and water systems, and set up health centers. The WHC was concerned about the damage created by the cyclones and the repairs to be undertaken. They requested the Yemen Environment Protection Authority (EPA) to ensure that 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. All repair plans were to be approved by the WHC before any decisions were made or implemented.

At first, the inhabitants of Socotra appreciated the UAE's assistance; however, they soon 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 armed conflicts of the war.

The UAE, likewise, expanded the island's only airport at the capital city, Hadibo, built military bases, and installed several telecommunication towers and two signals intelligence (SIGINT) systems. The UAE's ambition in the occupation of Socotra is to

dominate the surrounding strategic maritime shipping routes and establish a tourism industry. Its occupation violates Yemeni sovereignty under international law and the 1972 World Heritage Convention.

The UAE authorities sacked the governor of Socotra and the EPA chairman, replacing them with individuals loyal to the Emirates, 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 Patriot missiles in Socotra at the request of the UAE.

### **Disrupting Socotra**

The UAE has dramatically disrupted the way of life for those living on the archipelago. For example, in Abd al-Kuri, the majority of the residents were forcefully deported to convert the island into a UAE military base—a violation of international humanitarian law and a war crime. On Socotra, the largest island in the archipelago, the UAE has encouraged inhabitants to sell their homes, promising the owners residency and work permits in the UAE.

According to outside observers, foreign occupiers have disrupted the lives of the inhabitants by militarization and unsustainable development. Hadibo is being transformed by the construction of buildings in concrete and cement without regard for traditional building practices or the environment and the necessary public services such as adequate waste management.

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. 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 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. Ignoring the warnings of the WHC, the UAE has imported pesticides, palm trees, seeds, and invasive species, actions that 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.” A prerequisite of tourism development on a World Heritage Site is the completion of an independent Environmental Impact Assessment. The UAE has not abided by this requirement and has, in fact, been bulldozing land to build high-rise hotels for tourism, marketing Socotra as an adventure vacation site, and facilitating flights from Abu Dhabi for tourists on visas issued by the UAE. Several decades ago, the UAE had plans to turn Socotra into a tourist investment, but the Yemeni government rejected their proposals. Now, the UAE is seizing the opportunity to implement those plans.

The UAE claims that its activities constitute long-term development projects under the Khalifa Bin Zayed Al Nahyan Foundation; their actions, however, 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.”

Many inhabitants have demonstrated against the UAE occupation and have been jailed in “unofficial detention facilities” operated by the UAE on the island. The residents have also lodged complaints with the Yemeni exiled government 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.

The population of Hadibo has increased significantly, not only with the arrival of Yemenis from the mainland fleeing the war but also as a result of an influx of Indian and Pakistani nationals brought by the UAE as labor. In response to complaints by residents, Saudi forces arrived in Socotra in 2019 to curtail UAE activities. They, too, disregarded the World Heritage operational guidelines, building their own telecommunication tower and a military base and converting the EPA office into their headquarters. Tensions over Socotra remain between the Saudi-led Coalition partners.

Ironically, the president for COP28 designated by the UAE, Sultan Ahmed Al Jaber, who is the UAE Minister for Industry and Advanced Technology and chief executive of

ADNOC (Abu Dhabi National Oil Company), emphasized at the Petersburg Climate Dialogue in Berlin (May 2023), the need to broaden the “definition of adaptation to enable global climate resilience, transform food systems, and enhance forestry, land use, and water management.”

But in practice, as noted above, the UAE flouts such principles and is home to ADNOC, the seventh-largest oil company worldwide. Al Jaber has gone so far as to argue that the previous COP summits failed to make significant progress because the fossil fuel industry was ignored. “Whether we like it or not, the world will continue to need [fossil fuels],” he said, even as he asserted that his focus was to “phase out emissions” from every source. Presumably, if anyone raises the question about the UAE activities in Socotra, Al-Jaber will find a similar soothing answer for the destruction of its biodiversity.

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