



In This Issue

An Oryx Update

Written by Tillman Durdin and John Lawton

Additional photographs by Paul F. Hoye

Carefully coaxed by conservationists and protected by proud members of Oman's Harasis tribe, a scattering of Arabian oryx (*Oryx leucoryx*) - the world's rarest antelope - have reestablished themselves in the ancestral homeland from which overhunting had eradicated them more than 20 years before (See *Aramco World*, July-August 1982).

In an international conservation effort, a herd of 10 zoo-bred oryx were released in 1982 onto the Jiddat al-Harasis, a remote desert plain in central Oman where - a decade earlier - hunters had slaughtered the world's last wild-ranging Arabian oryx.

As the new herd grows - through the birth of calves in the wild as well as by regular additions of captive-bred animals from San Diego's Wild Animal Park - it is approaching an aggregate size and condition that will justify the project's anxious sponsors in Oman, the United States and Europe in concluding that the Arabian oryx is the first wild animal once extinct in its native habitat ever to be successfully re-introduced there.

This handsome antelope, with its dramatic back-swept horns, snow-white, coat and jet-black facial markings, once roamed over much of Arabia. The largest and most spectacular of the Peninsula's wild animals, able to survive the harshest of environments, and with no other enemy than man, the oryx was safe in the desert. Safe, that is, until the arrival of the four-wheel-drive vehicle and the project's automatic repeater rifle. In a classic case of extermination by over-hunting, the oryx was eradicated in the wild.

Fortunately, conservationists were one step ahead of the hunters. In a project begun in 1962, the Fauna Preservation Society of London, with help from the World Wildlife Fund, captured three of the last surviving wild oryx in South Yemen (then the Aden Protectorate). With five other animals donated by Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, and one lent by the London Zoological Society, they were flown to the United States to become the nucleus of the so-called World Herd at the Phoenix [Arizona] Zoo and the San Diego [California] Wild Animal Park.

The World Herd prospered. By 1980 it had increased to about 100 animals, and the first group of oryx was returned to Oman, where the Jiddat al-Harasis had been designated by the Omani government as a protected preserve for the re-introduction of the oryx to the wild.

The most recent airborne shipment to Oman, of four males and four females, was made in January of this year. The oryx traveled from San Diego under the care of American Larry Killmer, who is now in charge of them at the park.

Once in Oman, each group of oryx is kept in pens for a few months until they become accustomed to Oman's climate and vegetation. They are then released into a 20-hectare (50-acre) enclosure where they can meet other members of the herd and begin to establish the social relationships that will govern their interactions in the wild. Finally they are freed to roam at will over the bluffs and flatlands of their new-old homeland, the Jiddat al-Harasis, an environment quite different from that of the American zoos to which they were accustomed.

The Jiddah, a vast stony desert occupying the center of Oman between the sandy Empty Quarter and the Indian Ocean, has little rain, few wells and no surface water. But in parts of the area a curious interplay of land and ocean winds brings year-round dew and fog that keep grasses and tree leaves green throughout the year, providing food and shelter for the Jiddah's abundant wildlife, including gazelles, jerboas, hares, hedgehogs, foxes and golden eagles. The oryx must slake their thirst by licking up this moisture as it settles on plant surfaces. On the one hand this persistent wetness is in marked contrast with the dry conditions that the transplanted animals experienced in their American refuges. On the other hand, water was always plentiful there, unlike in the Jiddah, where the oryx have had to become accustomed to going without ample water for long periods.

"They must learn what's good to eat, since they are not going to be fed as they were in captivity," says Tim Tear, the young American who is field manager of the Oryx operation at the little headquarters settlement of Yalooni. "They must learn how to pass the heat of the day under the shade of a tree, and how to adapt to herd structures. They have to find new grazing over long distances and to learn to follow rain for 100

kilometers (60 miles) or more. It takes several years for them to become confident of their environment. They have to be coaxed and helped a lot at first."

The released oryx, however, have shown themselves well able to adapt to desert conditions, and, although born and reared in zoos, have proved that they retain the natural instincts important for their survival in the wild.

They have successfully located areas of green grazing that developed after local rainfall, and have managed to survive up to three months without drinking water. They have also demonstrated the species' natural propensity for keeping in touch: For instance, a pregnant female which needed to range farther afield for its grazing could count on the help of a male, standing in an intermediate position, to act as a visual marker to the main herd.

As they have grown in confidence and numbers, most of the oryx have dispersed into small units of about five animals each, usually led by a dominant male. Some animals choose to be solitary, particularly females about to calve.

"Oryx, like people, have different personalities," says Tear's wife Deborah. "Some like large groups, others small. Some stick to one group, and some change groups."

So far the oryx have roamed over only about 7,000 square kilometers (2,700 square miles) of the Jiddah - about a seventh of its total area. Most groups are now independent of human support, apart from the protective surveillance provided by rangers of the Harasis Bedouin tribe, which has lived on the Jiddah for hundreds of years. Trained in modern as well as traditional tracking methods - some of the oryx wear radio-transmitter collars - they ensure that the animals come to no harm, and intercept any vehicles that might threaten them.

The Harasis rangers are able to know daily the location and movements of every oryx - each one has been given a name - and to report by radio or in person to the Tears. Tim and Deborah use computers to keep detailed information on every individual in the herd: its feeding habits, behavior, sickness, movements, groupings, and mating. These data are sent regularly to Muscat, the Omani capital, where Scotsman Ralph M. Daly is in overall charge of the oryx operation as Sultan Qaboos bin Said's advisor for environmental conservation.

So far, 54 oryx calves have been born in Oman and 41 of them have survived. The whole herd now numbers 72 animals.

"It will take quite a few years more to build up numbers sufficient to ensure the permanent presence of the oryx in the wild in Oman," states Daly. "We should have 200 or more to be sure they have the genetic differentiation to breed healthily and to survive diseases, long spells of bad weather and other bad breaks."

While that prospect is not yet assured, support for the oryx project is as firm as ever, in particular from Sultan Qaboos and from the Harasis rangers, who see the animals as living symbols of their own heritage. With the most difficult parts of this rescue from extinction accomplished, it seems that the Arabian oryx is indeed on the way back.

Tillman Durdin was for 37 years, a foreign correspondent for The New York times in the Far East, the Middle East and North Africa.

John Lawton is an Aramco World contributing editor.

This article appeared on pages 12-15 of the September/October 1989 print edition of *Saudi Aramco World*.

[Current Issue](#)

[Archives](#)

[Departments](#)

[About Us](#)

[Search](#)

[Copyright and Permissions](#)

[Feedback](#)

[Job Opportunities](#)

[RSS](#)

Copyright © 2004-2014 Aramco Services Company. All rights reserved.