

Don't desert drylands

Did you know that the United Nations declared 2005 as The International Year of Sport and Physical Education (see <http://www.un.org/sport2005/>)? I asked about 30 friends, some at least of whom are involved in sport in a semi-professional capacity, and not a single person was aware of this Declaration. Given this apparently poor performance of the UN's publicity machine, I have decided to help with this year's Declaration by publicizing it here.

The UN General Assembly has declared 2006 as the International Year of Deserts and Desertification (see <http://www.iydd.org/>). The Declaration invites all countries and international and civil society organizations to support activities that raise public awareness of the problems of desertification and land degradation. In addition, 5 June 2006 will be World Environment Day, with the slogan *Don't desert drylands*, and 17 June 2006 will be World Day to Combat Desertification and Drought.

With this Declaration the UN is apparently underlining its concern at the exacerbation of desertification, particularly in Africa, and noting the implications of desertification for the implementation of the eight Millennium Development Goals. These were drawn up at the United Nations Millennium Summit in September 2000, and the aim is to achieve them by 2015. Biodiversity conservation is not only an integral part of Goal 7 (Ensure environmental sustainability) but also underpins several of the other Goals (Roe & Elliott, 2004).

The declaration of 2006 as the International Year of Deserts and Desertification also aims to raise public awareness of the need to protect desert biodiversity and the traditional knowledge of communities affected by desertification. A related UN press release points out that drylands comprise 41% of the world's land surface and support two billion people. The Declaration is also tied into the 1994 United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification, which was singled out at the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development as a key instrument for poverty eradication in dryland rural areas.

The main objective of the 2006 declaration is '... to get the message across that desertification is a major threat to humanity, compounded by both climate change and loss of biological diversity.' Celebrations for the year include, in what now seems to be an obligatory fashion, a unique

logo, in this case representing two issues in one image: deserts as natural ecosystems and desertification as a global problem.

Certainly arid lands receive insufficient attention, even from amongst researchers publishing in this journal. I examined papers published in *Oryx* during 2002–2005 and found that only 4% of them concerned deserts or desert biodiversity. There have of course, following massive losses of desert mammals during the 20th century, been a few well known successes such as the reintroduction of the Arabian oryx into the deserts of Oman and Saudi Arabia, but the overall picture is bleak.

The last time that deserts and desertification really attracted major public interest it was for reasons other than biodiversity loss. In the early 1970s a combination of land degradation and drought in the Sahel, the southern fringe of the Sahara, led to widespread famine and a huge toll in human life. Since then, however, even following another drought and famine in 1983–1985, these areas have not been the focus of international attention on either people or biodiversity. In a recent news item in this journal (*Oryx*, 39, 121–122) John Newby noted that '... the Sahel and the Sahara are simply not part of the hotspot dominated international conservation landscape', and he described the recent establishment of the Sahara Conservation Fund, which aims to refocus attention on the conservation of Saharan biodiversity. If this or any other organization wishes to highlight the sorry plight of the biodiversity of dryland areas by utilizing the focus of the International Year of Deserts and Desertification, the relative paucity of funding for conservation of so-called coldspots (Entwistle, 2004) will be a major problem.

Desertification is an emotive word, conjuring images of fertile pastures slowly obliterated under advancing seas of sand. Deserts are, of course, already deserts, and it is at the desert fringes, such as the Sahel, where problems of degradation mostly arise. Because their soils and climate can support only limited agriculture these areas are very susceptible to pressures from human population expansion. With a large number of people dependent on the meagre resources provided by drylands, this year's focus on desertification is relevant to the expanding interest in the link between conservation and poverty reduction (Sanderson & Redford, 2003; Roe & Elliott, 2004). This focus was certainly absent during the 1970s

drought in the Sahel. I searched volumes 9–15 (1965–1980) of *Oryx* for mention of the Sahel during the period of the drought, and could find only four substantial references. These were all principally concerned with large mammals, and whilst they briefly mentioned the drought, only two of the articles specifically discussed the factors that had exacerbated the effects of several years without rainfall.

In this context it is not well known that the largest protected area in Africa, covering 7.7 million ha, is in the Sahara: the Air and Ténéré National Nature Reserve in Niger, with its exceptional assemblage of landscapes, vegetation and wildlife. The area was inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List in 1991 but only one year later was placed on the World Heritage in Danger List because the biodiversity of the Reserve suffered considerably during a period of military conflict and civil disturbance. Coincidentally, although not specifically aimed at desert areas, this is the sort of problem for which the Rapid Response Facility for Natural World Heritage Sites under threat (see <http://www.fauna-flora.org/rrf/>), a collaboration between Fauna & Flora International, the UNESCO World Heritage Centre and the United Nations Foundation, was recently established. When urgent situations arise critical time is often lost organizing a response, and the Rapid Response Facility will provide flexible resources to address emergencies affecting World Heritage Sites.

Despite their often unique biodiversity and human cultures, drylands have been neglected for too long. If the International Year of Deserts and Desertification is to be successful in its aim of raising public awareness about the problems of land degradation the Declaration needs to become more visible. The Millennium Development Goals Report 2005 (see <http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/>) does not single out drylands for a mention. With only 10 years remaining in which to achieve the Goals, how likely is it that environmental sustainability will be ensured in drylands by 2015?

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References

- Entwistle, A. (2004) Eurasia – a biodiversity coldspot? *Oryx*, **38**, 239–240.
- Roe, D. & Elliott, J. (2004) Poverty reduction and biodiversity conservation: rebuilding the bridges. *Oryx*, **38**, 137–139.
- Sanderson, S.E. & Redford, K.H. (2003) Contested relationships between biodiversity conservation and poverty alleviation. *Oryx*, **37**, 389–390.

Note from the Editor

Book Reviews A number of readers have drawn my attention to the fact that the second (2004) edition of *Curassows and Related Birds* by Jean Delacour & Dean Amadon (Lynx Edicions, Barcelona, Spain) was not only reviewed in *Oryx* (Daniel M. Brooks, *Oryx*, **39**, 229–230) but also in *Ibis*, *Conservation Biology*, *Wilson Bulletin* and *Auk*, all by the same person. We had not anticipated that someone would simultaneously agree to review the same book for more than one journal. As we believe this is inappropriate we have altered the way that book reviews are handled to ensure that, as far as possible, this does not occur again.

AGORA I am pleased to announce that *Oryx* is now available through AGORA (<http://www.aginternetwork.org/en/index.php>). AGORA provides free electronic access to various journals and is available to students and researchers in qualifying not-for-profit institutions in eligible developing countries. The full list of institutions and organizations currently with access in each country can be found on the AGORA website. Users are required to register and access is password controlled. *Oryx* is also included in two other programmes aimed at developing countries: eIFL.net (<http://www.eifl.net/about/about.html>) and the Programme for the Enhancement of Research Information of the International Network for the Availability of Scientific Publications (<http://www.inasp.info/peri/intro.shtml>).

ConservationEvidence.com (<http://www.conservationevidence.com>) is dedicated to making information available on the effectiveness of conservation management and action (see *Oryx*, **39**, 1–2). This initiative provides the means of collating information from multiple sources, including published papers, reports and the evidence of conservation practitioners. I would like to encourage authors of papers already published in *Oryx* that contain information relevant to conservation evidence to consider summarizing their work for the website. As an illustration, I have added the lead paper for this issue (Mammals of the high altitudes of western Arunachal Pradesh, eastern Himalaya: an assessment of threats and conservation needs, Charudutt Mishra, M.D. Madhusudan & Aparajita Datta) to ConservationEvidence.com

Oryx It is my pleasure to report that the number of submissions to the journal continues to increase each year, with a 10% increase in papers submitted during 2005. Approximately 44% have been accepted for publication. Please note that the *Oryx* Centenary Archive (1903–2003), on both CD-ROM and DVD, is still available. For further information please write to oryx@fauna-flora.org