

## NO HOME FOR THE HOUSE CROW ON SOCOTRA



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The biodiversity of Socotra is so unique and fragile that a total ban on exporting and importing any biological material has been issued for the Archipelago. Therefore biologists were concerned when two couples of alien specie of the House Crow *Corvus splendens* arrived at the island in 1993. The newcomers, nesting by the old Hadibu jetty, gradually managed to build up a significant population spreading to another two wadis of Hadibu and Sirhen.

With 30 House Crows living on the island in the year 2000, a team of bird experts, led by Richard Porter and Omar Al-Saghir from the Birdlife International, began negotiations with the Socotra branch of the Environment Protection Authority (EPA) and the ongoing GEF Socotra Biodiversity Project about necessary actions that needed to be taken.

The House Crow was highly threatening both to the unique biodiversity of the Socotra Archipelago and to local people's crop and livestock sustainability. Original Socotri reptiles and birds were particularly endangered. By capturing eggs of grey shrieks and palm trees pigeons and by assaulting birds of all sizes up to the Egyptian vultures, the crow population managed to chase migratory species from their natural habitats in several wadis. Local people were exposed to frequent attacks of crows on juvenile household chickens and sheep. Several cases of the crow entering inside a house were reported.

The House Crow eradication campaign that started in 2000 needed a creative approach. Experts faced several failures before finding the terminal solution. The GEF Socotra Biodiversity Project, followed later by the GEF-UNDP Socotra Conservation and Development Programme (SCDP) in cooperation with the EPA, was constantly working on a scheme of preventive measures to keep the rising population of the House Crow under control and, subsequently, remove it from the island.

In the first phase of the House Crow eradication, small traps were brought from the United Kingdom. However, they proved to be too small and the crows were smart enough to find their food on the coast and at garbage sites. A year later, a special trap was constructed with the assistance of Richard Porter and Omar Al-Saghir. Still, the method proved not reliable and the crow population was still rising in numbers!



Another approach was tested at the end of 2001 when professional army shooters were brought to the Hadibu Wadi. However, not a single crow was hit in the four days of the shooting campaign.

The third phase of the House Crow eradication started in 2002. The Socotra Biodiversity Project launched an awareness campaign explaining the tremendous impact of the alien bird on livestock to the local inhabitants.

Interviews with people living close to the areas of the House Crow appearance were conducted and information on their nesting and diet were



collected with an inventory list of the alien birds as the output. The Socotris were encouraged to monitor the crow population and to report any increase in numbers or changes in behavior.

The most devoted observers happened to be the school children. They got the most precise information about crow nest locations and numbers of eggs. They brought 61 eggs to the EPA office but they were soon asked by experts not to do so because losing their eggs made the female crows to lay even more of them. Instead, it was decided to let the eggs hatch and collect the young ones. Socotri children handed in 177 young House Crows for the reward of 1000 – 1500 Yemeni Rials for each bird, depending on its age. That helped to get the House Crow population under control and to restrict its distribution to Hadibu area only.

Last phase of the project was conducted by the SCDP cooperating with the GEF-Small Grant Programme. In 2009, a couple of professional shooters, equipped with special guns, were brought from Germany and Great Britain. During their trip to Socotra, last April, they killed the last 13 crows, leaving the island completely clean from the alien specie.

The SCDP project had been officially closed just few weeks before this long expected moment to be followed by a new project aimed on Strengthening Socotra's Policy and Regulatory Framework for Mainstreaming Biodiversity (SGBP).

The SGBP, together with the Invasive Species Control Group funded by the GEF- Small Grant Programme, will continue in monitoring the island in the future.

The House Crow eradication campaign was a great example of cooperation between the local people and the experts. "Only with their mutual support could we reach the difficult goal," said

Dr. Nadim Taleb, the SGBP National Project Coordinator who was with the team through all years of the eradication attempts.

The nine year long campaign against the House Crow on Socotra was funded by the GEF Project, the UNDP-GEF Projects and the GEF-Small Grant Programme.

The EPA facilitated all eradication activities on the island. The total cost of all actions taken reached US\$ 15,000. An additional outcome of the project is the SCDP plan to rearrange the garbage disposal methods in settlements and to design enforcement measures.

"We are happy to share our experience and lessons learned with the readers," said Dr. Taleb. He pointed out that the House Crow needed just a single day to settle on the island but it took the experts a decade to eradicate it. It is important to be noted that, in the Socotra case, the House Crow arrived on cargo ships!

