

From Collectors to Conservationists: Al Wabra Wildlife Preservation

Al Wabra Wildlife Preservation (AWWP) is a private conservation and endangered species breeding-center located in the Arabian gulf State of Qatar. Founded by Sheikh Saoud Bin Mohammed Bin Ali Al-Thani, the facility focuses on work with threatened antelope and bird species. Although AWWP has had great success with numerous endangered animals, the Preserve is most noted for developing a captive breeding program for the Spix's Macaw, a species of parrot now extinct in the wild and once considered "the world's most endangered bird species."

In May 2009 Mark Szotek from Mongabay, a non-profit provider of conservation and environmental science news, visited Al Wabra in Qatar to speak with Dr. Sven Hammer, the Director of Wildlife and Veterinary Services at Al Wabra, Ryan Watson, Blue Macaw Coordinator, and Dr. Amrita Deb, Al Wabra's Head of Conservation. The following is a compilation his interviews.

Mongabay: *Please tell us about Al Wabra's mission and how the facility evolved from a "hobby farm" of the Al-Thani family into a world-class facility for breeding endangered species?*

Dr. Hammer (Director of

Wildlife and Veterinary Services): It is quite common for wealthy Sheikhs in the gulf region to keep wild animals, most of which are acquired illegally from unstable parts of the world such as the Horn of Africa region. Rarely do these animals receive proper care and are simply replaced if and when they die. Just prior to the turn of the 21st century Sheikh Saoud made the decision that this practice was no longer personally acceptable and that if he was going to continue keep exotic animals at Al Wabra farm, conditions had to improve. From this point, professional zoo management practices were implemented through the hiring of qualified and experienced staff to manage the animals at Al Wabra. Sheikh Saoud went from "Collector" to "Protector" and Al Wabra went from your typical Arabian hobby farm to a world class wildlife preserve.

Now the mission of AWWP is to maintain genetically and demographically sustainable populations of "focal species." This is accomplished by providing facilities conducive to breeding success through the stringent management of behavioral, nutritional, and health requirements. Most of our focal species are currently threatened with extinction, but not all. However, one thing they all have in common is that they are very rare in captivity and for some species, AWWP has the only managed captive population in the world."

Mongabay: *The Spix's Macaw is the flagship species of AWWP. How did AWWP come to work with this very endangered bird?*

Ryan Watson (Blue Macaw Coordinator): The Spix's Macaw had long been a species which Sheikh Saoud admired for its beauty and unique physical characteristics. In 1999 Sheikh Saoud requested information about the conservation activities for the Spix's Macaw, with the intention of involving AWWP if it would be beneficial for the species. Realizing the full plight of this very endangered species, we stepped forward".

Mongabay: *Sheikh Al Thani is a noted international art collector; how did the Spix's Macaw's rarity and beauty play a factor in choosing to work with this species?*

Dr. Hammer: “Sheikh Saoud does admire the rare and beautiful and is a world renowned art collector. However working with the Spix’s Macaw (and other endangered species) offered a more compelling opportunity by acting as a “protector” rather than a “collector.”

Mongabay: *At one point there were less than 40 Spix’s Macaws known to exist, scattered around the globe in private collections. Al Wabra management stepped up to acquire most of the birds remaining in private hands – What led to this decision?*

Ryan Watson: “At this time there were considerable problems within the group of people involved with Spix’s Macaw conservation; for example the second largest holder of Spix’s Macaws, Dr. Joseph Hammerli, pulled out of the program and sold most of his birds to another private collector, Roland Messer of Switzerland (Dr. Hammerli would not comment on the location of his remaining birds). This left the majority of the birds remaining in the program in one location, Birds International Incorporated (BII), Manila – Philippines, the largest commercial parrot breeding facility in the world. Al Wabra contacted BII to discuss the possibility of sending some of their Spix’s Macaws to Qatar to establish another breeding population. BII agreed that it would be wise to split the population for bio-security reasons and sent AWWP 4 birds in 2000.

In 2002 another 4 birds were sent to AWWP, this time from Roland Messer whose Spix’s Macaws had also become part of the official breeding program. By this stage the last wild Spix’s Macaw had disappeared and the international committee for the recovery of the species had been dissolved due to constant disagreements between the members. The species future looked very bleak, but Sheikh Saoud and the Al Wabra team were committed to the species survival. In 2003 when BII decided that all of its Spix’s Macaws would be best managed at AWWP (due to serious health problems that were threatening the birds) Sheikh Saoud did not hesitate to make available the resources necessary for facilitating another 25 birds. As Roland Messer encountered financial problems and could no longer adequately run his breeding facility, he also decided to transfer ownership of his 11 birds to Sheikh Saoud in 2003 (He retained ownership of one breeding pair, which Al Wabra managed until 2005). This is how AWWP acquired its founding stock and since 2004 we have bred 21 Spix’s Macaws.

Currently our population stands at 52, all of which are managed as part of the international studbook for the species that currently includes 68 birds.

Mongabay: *Your group plans to return the Spix’s Macaw to the wilds of Brazil. How are your efforts proceeding?*

Ryan Watson: Returning Spix’s Macaws to the wild is AWWP’s goal but first we must establish a stable and sustainable captive population, a task which is proving extremely difficult because of health and genetic issues (infertility). In the mean time, AWWP, along with several other groups participating in Spix’s Macaw conservation are supporting education programs in the Curaca region of Brazil where the species formerly occurred. Two important pieces of former habitat which were on private property have been acquired for the species if and when the Spix’s Macaw is able to be reestablished in the wild. One of these properties, a 2200 hectare parcel called Concordia Farm was purchased by Al Wabra late in 2008.

Mongabay: *The last wild Spix’s Macaws suffered from habitat loss coupled by pressures from the “pet trade.” What efforts are AWWP and the Brazilian government taking to insure that reintroduced birds do not suffer a similar fate?*

Ryan Watson: Community awareness activities occurred in the Curaca region throughout the 1990s and continues today in the form of education programs. The Spix's Macaw is now very important to the local community and therefore the success of releases is of the highest priority. Part of our education process is to help local people understand that poaching benefits only a few people, where as protection of the species has the potential to benefit an entire community through employment opportunities, improved literacy and eco tourism. Additionally, the full time presence of conservationists in an area is generally a very effective deterrent to poachers who typically can only operate in locations receiving little or no attention. Two good examples of this in Brazil are the Hyacinth Macaws and Lear's Macaws; both species populations significantly increased in numbers once conservation projects were established in their habitats. This is almost entirely due to reduced poaching. The Spix's Macaw is now so high profile that it would be very hard for illegal trafficking to go unnoticed.

Mongabay: *What other endangered species and conservation agendas are focuses for AWWP?*

Dr. Amrita Deb (Head of Conservation): "The philosophy at AWWP is to carry out in-situ (field) research in parallel with the ex-situ (captive) breeding efforts. Both efforts tend to complement each other in species conservation. A good example of this is in regards to work with the Lear's Macaw. AWWP (and other conservation facilities) had been unsuccessful in breeding this species. In-situ studies on the habitat and ecology of the wild population in Brazil revealed an intricate nesting structure with tunnels used by the birds in cliff walls. When these patterns were replicated at AWWP, a chick was hatched the following year and every year since.

Another species AWWP is working with in the field is the Dibatag Antelope (*Ammodorcas clarkei*), a unique and endangered endemic of the Ogaden region in Ethiopia. This area is at the heart of the conflict zone between Ethiopian authorities and guerrilla fighters of Somali origin. On the basis of the 3 year research project, AWWP made recommendations to the local authorities for delineating a conservation area for the species and has made an offer, supported by the IUCN captive breeding specialist group (CBSG), to manage a safety-net population at AWWP using abandoned juvenile animals from Ethiopia.

AWWP is also involved with the conservation of the Blue-headed Quail Dove (*Starnoenas cyanocephala*) endemic of Cuba. AWWP's expertise in captive management contributed to the breeding success of the ex-situ (captive) population in Cuba and in-situ research and awareness initiatives to conserve this endangered species remaining habitat.

Mongabay: *What's ahead for AI Wabra? What new projects and conservation initiatives will the Preserve undertake?*

Dr. Amrita Deb: Beside the ongoing Spix's Macaw and Dibatag Antelope projects, which will remain a focus for the coming years, there are considerations of buying land in different countries for habitat protection (e.g. Madagascar, East Africa). AWWP now tends to alter its conservation strategies from working solely with individual species towards habitat conservation. Because of the increasing human population, saving ecosystems is the most important step to preserve biodiversity for future generations.

Mongabay: *The AI Wabra story represents a success for both the "marriage" of captive breeding efforts with field conservation and the important shift from the "collector*