

COVER

'Stealth bomber': Greatly elongated ears enable the yellow-winged bat, *Lavia frons*, to pick up the footfalls, or mating calls, of insects moving on the ground or among branches. This, and a very high frequency echolocation call, provides for unerringly accurate prey detection.

Photo: Merlin D Tuttle/Bat Conservation International

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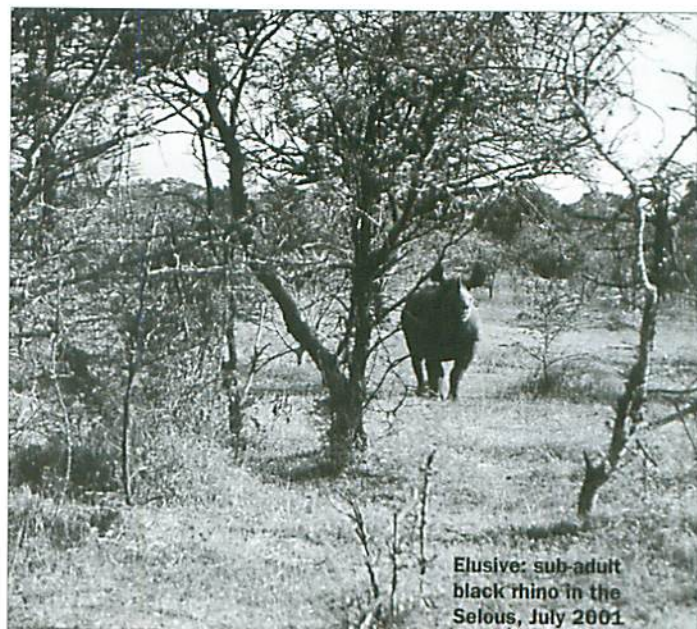
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The impala is the symbol of the East African Wild Life Society. 'Swara' is the Swahili word for antelope.



Elusive: sub-adult black rhino in the Selous, July 2001

Photos: © FELIX PATTON

Rhino patrol

*Finding, let alone photographing, free-ranging rhinos in Tanzania can be a tricky business, finds **Felix Patton**.*

Over much of Africa, the chances of getting to see a black rhinoceros outside the confines of a closely guarded sanctuary are slim. But there is one place where – astonishingly – free ranging black rhinos are still holding out in some numbers.

That place is the remote northern sector of Tanzania's vast Selous Game Reserve, itself home to most of that country's remaining rhinos. So shy are these animals, however, that nobody has yet been able to determine precisely how many of these free ranging rhinos there are.

To manage and protect any threatened animal population – however thin on the ground – it is necessary first to determine its head count and distribution. But in the Selous this is no easy task, given that circumstances have long since forced the rhinos to lie-up in dense thickets and to flee at the slightest whiff of approaching people, even to the extent of moving home ranges where overly bothered by human traffic. And the Selous, spanning an area of more than 44,000 km², is bigger than some entire European countries – Denmark, for example, or Switzerland.

The challenge – of tracing, identifying, and keeping tabs on rhinos in the northern Selous – has become the focus of a monitoring programme, originally set up by the Sand River Rhino Project but since formalised by Tanzania's National Rhino Conservation Co-ordinator, Matthew Maiges, with backing from the Selous Rhino Trust and a 759,000-Euro (about US\$ 843,000) grant from the European Union.

The priority now, according to the programme's Technical Co-ordinator Friedrich Alpers, is to gather two main banks of data: ID photographs and DNA profiles (derived from faecal samples) for each animal. Locations are GPS-recorded for distribution mapping. "Only when all the DNA analyses are done," says Alpers, "can we hope to compile an accurate picture of these rhinos, and their respective ranges."

In the meantime, Alpers' eight-strong team, deployed daily in small patrols, walks hundreds of kilometres each week in search of the vital signs – footprints, dung, browse, and trails – that may lead to the animals. Tracking here is difficult, on hard ground where footprints are indistinct, if discernible at all. The dense bush also makes for poor visibility. The rhinos move about mainly at night, browsing and visiting waterholes, and are usually well hidden by daybreak.

Photographing the elusive beasts is almost impossible. Indeed, it is five years since a full-frame profile of a Selous rhino was captured on film, and that shot was the result of a chance encounter by a tourist couple. Alpers, though, as a Namibian who grew up with rhinos, has a real knack for finding them – as I discovered in July, this year, while out patrolling with him and five of his colleagues.

Four of us entered a patch of riverine forest, while the other three headed off across an adjacent expanse of dry grassland. Rhino activity had been reported here before. Within minutes, Alpers found fresh

footprints – one large set, one small – of a female and her calf. But the tracks were confusing, heading first one way, then another.

Alpers deduced that the pair must have followed a trail down to the water and then moved back, zigzag fashion, out on to the plain. The team fanned out and headed in the likely direction. And, within half an hour, among a herd of grazing buffalo, we were surprised to pick out the shape, not of an adult female with a calf, but of a single sub-adult black rhino.

The hard part was getting close enough to take good ID photographs with a standard 50 mm lens. The wind, blowing into our faces, was favourable. So Alpers, carrying only his camera, began the stalk, inching forward silently, freezing when he sensed the oxpeckers might betray his presence.

Finally, daring to wait no longer, he stood up, camera poised, and walked boldly up to the rhino, clicking away. The tactic paid off handsomely. For this young rhino, taken completely by surprise, stood rooted to the spot for valuable seconds before turning tail and running off. The pictures turned out to be among the best taken in years – ample recompense for months of toil.

Not surprisingly, given the difficulty of getting ID shots in this way, other ideas – including camera trapping and night vision equipment – are under consideration. If all goes well, Alpers and his team may yet amass a priceless record of this little known rhino population.

Felix Patton is researching rhino identification for an MSc in Conservation Biology at Manchester Metropolitan University in the UK. He has been studying rhino conservation for 15 years.



Soqatra. Endemics are found in all vegetation types throughout the islands; Soqatra has one of the richest island floras in the world. For example, there are seven endemic species of frankincense tree (*Boswellia* spp.), a higher concentration than anywhere else.

There are no indigenous mammals (the only mammals are livestock, civets, mice, rats, shrews and bats), but Soqatra is famous for its birds. So far 112 bird species have been

recorded, of which 31 are known to breed on Soqatra. Eleven subspecies and six species are endemic. These are the Soqatra sunbird, the Soqatra warbler, the Soqatra sparrow, the Soqatra starling, the Soqatra cisticola and the Soqatra bunting; the latter three are globally threatened.

Soqatra is recognised by BirdLife International as one of 221 globally important Endemic Bird Areas. It is also home to significant world populations of species such as the Egyptian vulture, of which there are about 1,000 breeding pairs, the largest number in the Middle East.

Some parts of the coast are exceptionally productive in terms of bird food, attracting a great number of migrant bird species. The coastal waters are also a haven for cetaceans; 16 species of whales and dolphins occur in the region. There are also green turtles and hawksbill turtles and a great variety of fish and marine invertebrates such as spiny rock lobsters, abalones, pearl oysters and giant clams.

In that famous shipping manual, *The Periplus of the Erythraean Sea*, written in the second century AD, Soqatra – known then as Dioscorida – is described as “very large, but desert and marshy, having rivers in it and crocodiles and many snakes and great lizards of which the flesh is eaten and the fat melted and used instead of olive oil. The island yields no fruit, neither

A spectacular flora: this frankincense tree (top left) is one of seven *Boswellia* species endemic to Soqatra. Desert roses (above) are ubiquitous on the island, where they are known as bottle trees. The cucumber tree (bottom left) is the only tree species belonging to the cucumber family. Bottom right: Soqatran dragon's blood trees were traditionally prized for their red sap, which was used in dyes and as a disinfectant.

vine nor grain. The inhabitants are few and they live on the coast towards the north, which from the side faces the continent. They are foreigners, a mixture of Arabs, Indians and Greeks who have emigrated to carry on trade there. The island produces the true sea-tortoise, and the land-tortoise and the white-tortoise, which is very numerous and preferred for its large shells, and the mountain tortoise...”

The larger reptiles cited no longer exist on the island, casualties no doubt of human activities over the past 2,000 years. There are, however, 24 terrestrial reptiles (more than half are geckoes), and of these as many as 21 are considered to be endemic. Snakes are represented by five endemic species, including two species of colubrid. Although harmless, the colubrids are frequently killed by the Bedouins, who subscribe to a myth that the snakes suckle their livestock for milk and poison the animals.

No amphibians have yet been discovered on Soqatra; it is possible that extreme droughts in the past may have wiped them



out. Whether there were ever any freshwater fish species on the island is a moot point. The predatory *Aphanius dispar*, introduced a few years ago to reduce malaria, has since formed stable populations. The invertebrates are represented mainly by arthropods and molluscs. There are some colourful butterflies, such as *Charaxes velox*, *C. balfouri* and *Papilio benetti*.

About 80 % of the land is used for grazing and 2 % for settlement, including some date palm groves and very small vegetable gardens in the lowlands. The remaining 18 % is semi-natural bushland. On the coast, fishing is the main livelihood. Sharks, killed with spears and harpoons, are salted and dried and then sold on the mainland. The government of Yemen, with the help of GEF/UNDP funding of US\$5 million, has been surveying the island's unique biodiversity in order to protect it. For there are government plans to develop the island's infrastructure, both to help the very poor human population of around 50,000 and to encourage tourism. For this reason, in January 2001, the Prime Minister of Yemen, Dr Abdul Karim al-Iryani, asked us to visit the still isolated island and to give our opinions on its development and tourism prospects.

Flights to Soqatra leave from the Yemen mainland only twice a week. Before unity of North and South Yemen in 1990, there were virtually no flights for civilians to Soqatra, only military ones. It was striking to come across the island in the vast ocean with its high mountains rising from the waves and bordered by a narrow golden coastal strip. We landed in the central plains of the north coast and were greeted by crowds of islanders dressed like South Yemenis in sarongs known as futahs in Yemen. Many people were collecting

provisions and a few letters, as nearly all food and supplies have to come from the mainland and there is no post office on Soqatra.

We were met as we descended from the plane (there is no airport building yet) by the manager of the Summer Land Hotel, as arranged for us by Universal Tours, the main tour company in Sanaa. We drove eastward along a stretch of tarmac for about a kilometre (so far the only tarmac on the island), and then continued along a murram coast road to the capital Hadibu, situated below the Haghier Mountains.

Hadibu is a dusty settlement of oblong, single-storey stone buildings, plainly constructed, and mostly empty dirt roads. Goats wander about sniffing at plastic bags to eat. As something of a new concept on Soqatra, litter in Hadibu is simply thrown out in the streets. But fortunately, because so few goods are imported, rubbish is still minimal. The few small shops in evidence stock only the most basic groceries.

Our hotel consisted of eight, simply furnished concrete bedrooms, but with adequate mosquito nets and shared cold showers. The island is very secure. Quite

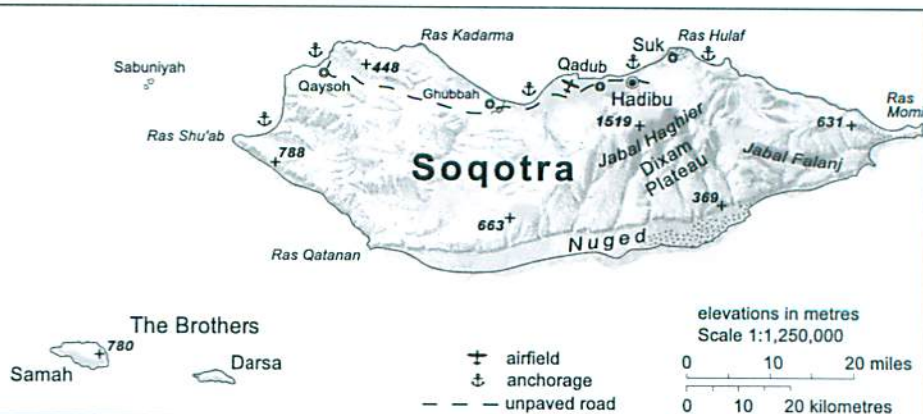
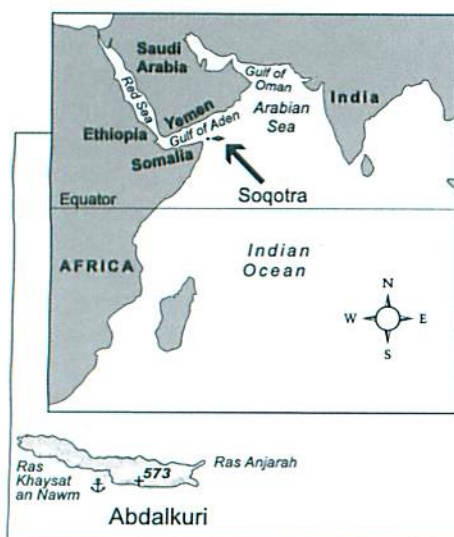
One of Soqatra's many beautiful tropical lagoons. At times, the majestic backdrop of mountains incongruously resembles the highlands of Scotland.

unlike most places in the world, you can safely leave your money belt on your bed with the door unlocked. Crime is almost non-existent. Food at the hotel is simple, but repetitive, usually chicken and rice imported from the mainland. There is another hotel – the al-Gazera, with five rooms – in central Hadibu, a short stroll away, but food is not provided there. We hired a vehicle and driver and, that first afternoon, visited the village of Suk, further east along the coast, passing beautiful lagoons and palm trees.

Suk was the old capital, but is today just a cluster of square stone huts with thatched roofs and shy people. The women had painted their faces and arms with a mixture of turmeric powder and water, and looked a mysterious golden colour. Although Moslem, they do not object as much to showing their hands and sometimes their faces as on the mainland. Above Suk is the remnant of a Portuguese fort perched atop the mountain,



Photos © ESMOND MARTIN



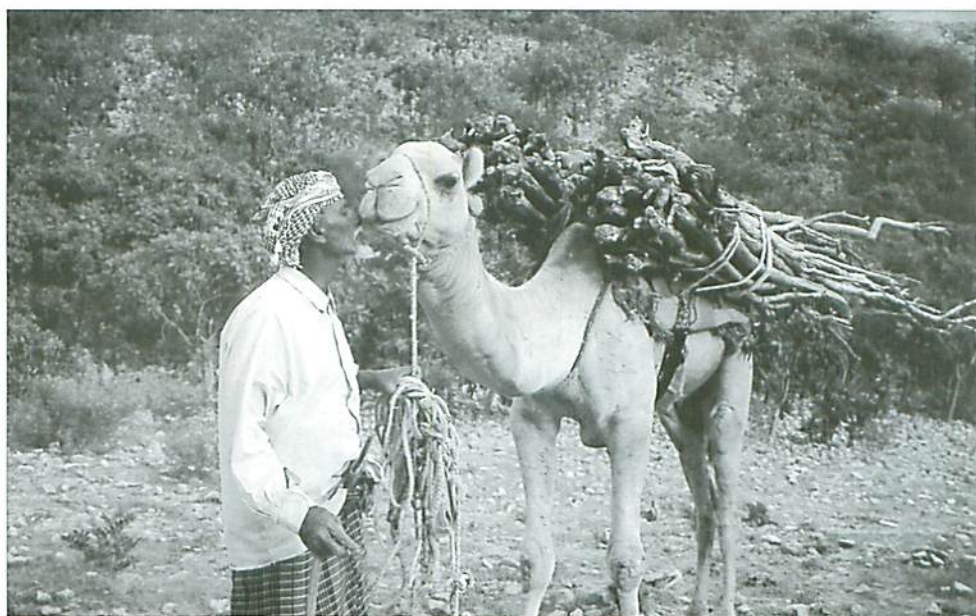


Photo: © LUCY VIGNE

and slightly further along is a jetty where a modern port is to be constructed once Soqatra's infrastructure develops. A canning factory for fish is also being planned.

We met an English road engineer who was surveying the bumpy roads and who is keen to widen and tarmac them if funds become available. But health and education standards are far behind the mainland, and perhaps these should receive a higher priority than improving the roads. Extremely few Soqotrans presently need a car, and on our drive to the south coast the next day, a rough journey of three hours up and down hills and along stony luggas covering 80 km, we saw only one other vehicle. Most people, apart from the fishermen on the coast, are

pastoralists living simple lives in the mountains with their goats and sheep, as their families have done for centuries.

On our drive south, we were lucky to meet Professor Vitali Naumkin, the world authority on Soqatra who, with a colleague from Russia, is writing down the unique Soqotran language. It is an ancient Semitic language, mostly related to the Jibali language in southwest Oman. Naumkin has been visiting Soqatra since 1972, and when we met him he was investigating a pre-Islamic burial site at Rookeb. The tombs are about 2,000 years old, although Islam did not reach Soqatra until about the 15th century.

When Naumkin first came to the island, there was no hotel and just five or so cars. Hadibu was then a village with small traditional houses and no cement for building and not a single shop. In around

Three-hour descent: This camel is carrying bundles of firewood, made up of desert rose branches, down to the plains from the mountains.

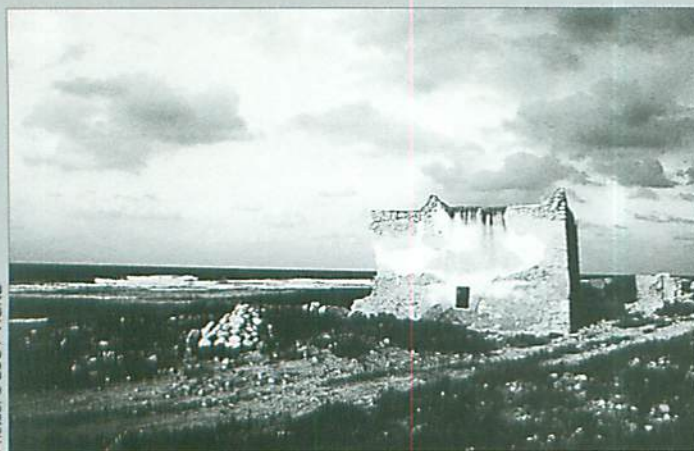
1967, trade gradually expanded. Local products – ghee, dates, honey, tree resins and dried shark and other fish meat – were exchanged for basic goods from the mainland. Although these traditional exports continue, some Soqotrans now work in the Gulf and with their earnings bring back a little gold, clothes and money to the island.

Since the union of North and South Yemen in 1990, Soqatra's economy has changed quite significantly; a few administrators and merchants have arrived from northern Yemen, and basic tourism started in around 1998. There is electricity, but only in Hadibu, from 4 p.m. to midnight each day. Even qat, the plant consumed daily as a stimulant by most northern Yemeni men, is flown in twice a week from Sanaa. There have been changes to how women dress; they now wear the scarf to cover their heads and noses in the highlands. The men have always been peaceful, so do not choose to wear jambiyas as on the mainland. Some wear a straight knife with a goat's horn handle at the front of their waists for practical use, not as a weapon.

A little further, on our journey to the village of Nuged in the south, we were fortunate to see two pairs of the rare Soqatra bunting in the scrub vegetation. Apart from scattered date palms, we saw no agriculture at all. Only at Suk did we see some vegetables being grown beside the houses. Grain crops are rarely cultivated anywhere on the island today. Most of the hills are covered in desert roses (*Adenium obesum*), cucumber trees (*Dendrosicyos socotrana*), myrrh, frankincense,

Soqotran firestarter (above) on the Dixam Plateau, and (below) the exterior of a typical Plateau-top stone dwelling.





A long history of neglect

Travellers and traders have been visiting Soqatra, known as 'the land of bliss,' for more than 2,000 years. They have been attracted partly by the island's aloes, frankincense and dragon's blood. Alexander the Great stopped off on Soqatra and, on the advice of Aristotle, encouraged some of his men to settle on the island. Later, more Greeks arrived along with some Christian Ethiopians.

By the seventh century, most of Soqatra's inhabitants were Christians, although according to Marco Polo many of the people still practised sorcery and witchcraft. When St Francis Xavier visited the island in 1542, he commented on the presence of many churches and on the devoutness of the people. He also stated that the people were illiterate, that the island was "poor and barren" and that Soqotrans survived on dates (from which a type of bread was made), milk and meat.

From the tenth century the island was ruled by Sultans from al-Mahra, now a backward region in southeastern Yemen, but foreigners continued to come and some even occupied the island. The Portuguese arrived in 1507, but left a few years later. The puritanical Wahabis from the Arabian mainland attacked Soqatra in 1800 and destroyed tombs, churches and graveyards.

Christianity was then already in decline and most Soqotrans were at least nominally Muslims. In 1876, the British signed a treaty with the Sultan and ten years later the island was made a British Protectorate. The British, however, let the Sultan go on governing the island with little outside interference. For many years there was no British officer nor businessman stationed on the island. The British simply avoided the place, with the result that there was very little develop-

ment. The British chose instead to build up the superior port of Aden, which became one of the largest and most efficient ports in the Indian Ocean.

In the 1950s the people of Soqatra were still living a very traditional lifestyle. Douglas Botting, who led the Oxford University scientific expedition to the island in 1956, wrote about a typical rural Soqotran: "He enjoys his meals but has no coffee or tea round which he can build a little ritual of entertainment... He plays nothing that can be recognised as a game; he never dances; he cannot draw, paint, carve or make anything beautiful... Culturally he is still in the Stone Age - he has no knowledge of metal-making, agriculture, navigation or the potter's wheel."

Michael Gwynne, also on the expedition, found that in 1956 sharia law was still in evidence. In Hadibu the local policeman would point proudly to his collection of bottles of pickled hands as testimony to his law enforcement prowess. At that time, there were no cars on the island and to move anywhere you either walked or rode a camel or donkey. During World War Two the RAF had a base on Soqatra that did have vehicles, but these were taken away when the base closed at the end of the war.

The Soqotran Sultanate ended in 1967 when the British pulled out of southern Arabia. It was replaced by a Marxist government based in Aden, which continued a policy of neglect towards Soqatra. The Marxist government did not allow many foreigners to visit the island. So rumours grew that the island had become a Russian military base. In 1990, when South and North Yemen joined to form one democratic country, Soqatra was integrated into a larger Yemen ruled from Sanaa and became more exposed to the outside world.

emta trees (*Euphorbia arbuscula*), and aloes (*Aloe pernyi*, among others). This was a beautiful drive, finally descending to the plains and towards a magnificent stretch of sandy beach and warm aquamarine sea with gently breaking waves. Not a house or a person was in sight, just a few crabs quietly scuttling across the sand. It was paradise indeed.

On our next day, we headed west from Hadibu and then southward on a recently bulldozed track, climbing up into the central highlands, a rolling limestone plateau dissected by steep-sided wadis. It was exciting to spot both the Soqatra sunbird and the Soqatra starling among the rare, endemic flora. We reached the Dixam plateau, famous for its dragon's blood trees (*Dracaena cinnabari*), silhouetted against the sky like giant umbrellas. The tree is actually a member of the Lily family, and its shape is an adaptation to the dry climate; the leaves are in fact short shoots borne at the ends of the youngest branches.

The Dixam region is where most of the island's humpless dwarf cattle are reared, along with other livestock. Although the rangeland still looks healthy, young dragon's blood trees are not growing up to replace the old trees because of livestock grazing and browsing, and the species could become extinct without protection. Since antiquity these trees have been famous for their red sap, called *cinnabari* by Pliny. He reported that the sap was the blood of a dragon that had been pressed to death by a dying elephant (alluding to an old Hindu myth).

In ancient times, the dragon's blood was used as a medicine, particularly a disinfectant.

'Giant umbrellas': Soqatra's famous dragon's blood trees (right) are considered to be at risk. Efforts are being made in Germany to propagate the trees from seeds.

In ruins: This old mosque on Soqatra's north coast (left, two views), one of only a few buildings on the island of real historical and architectural interest, has simply been abandoned to its fate. Right: The construction of new houses is the order of the day in Soqatra's small but growing capital, Hadibu.



Photos: © ESMOND MARTIN

Roman gladiators smeared their bodies with it for protection and to create a bloodied appearance. The people of Soqatra still use it as a red dye and a varnish for their pottery bowls and incense burners, but little is exported today.

On top of Dixam plateau, we met some rural people who showed us how they make fire by rubbing sticks together. They invited us to their small village of simple stone huts and cave dwellings to eat a mixture of rice, milk and ghee that was cooking over a hut-side fire. Some Egyptian vultures watched over us for scraps to eat. Of the 30 or so villagers, only one spoke Arabic, a man who had worked in Aden. All were barefooted despite the sharp limestone rocks. On our descent back to the north coast, we passed several camels, each carrying one household's weekly supply of wood to the village on the plain below. Camels are noted for their surefootedness in negotiating the rugged mountain passes of the interior.

The relatively small human population with its simple lifestyle still lives in harmony with this delicate environment; there is no sign of deforestation or serious overgrazing on the island. This balance could easily change, however. Economic assistance to the people must be very carefully considered so that the equilibrium with their environment is not destroyed and with it the people's livelihoods.

With the proposed improvements to the roads, for example, the already growing number of vehicles will increase further, carrying more imported food and building materials from the towns to the mountain villages, changing the lifestyle of the people.

Traditional knowledge could die and, with the accumulation of possessions, attitudes will change. Any introduction of browsing animals and new crop plants must be done extremely carefully. The present fragile equilibrium between vegetation, man and livestock could collapse if supplementary food and water were provided, disrupting patterns of rotational grazing and seasonal livestock movement. For example, the endemic cucumber tree could become extinct if not protected in the future from growing numbers of livestock, as it is palatable to goats and sheep.

The government hopes to increase the number of tourists to Soqatra once the

infrastructure is improved. Tourism has great potential, but needs to be limited in scale. Eco-tourism could flourish, for instance, with botanists and ornithologists walking and camping in the hills. Aqua tourism is fashionable today, and diving holidays are likely to become popular here, with an ocean of fascinating marine life and vast shoals of fish where the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean species meet and where plenty of old shipwrecks make diving that much more exciting.

In pre-radar days, ships were often wrecked on the rocks of this coast. Diving trips are already offered by Universal Tours, especially off the north-western tip of the island. The island has no historical buildings of interest to tourists, except for a mosque on the north coast that was built for the family of the Sultan who ruled Soqatra until 1967. It is now in a sad state of collapse, however, with sand blowing in through its pillars. It should urgently be restored and saved.

The island's climate is cooler and more temperate than on the adjacent mainlands. December to April is the best time to visit, as afterwards come the short rains, followed by harsh winds that blow across the island culminating in the main monsoon. Tourism, so far, has not amounted to much; there were fewer than 100 visitors in 2000. Now is the time, then, to visit this amazing island if you want to experience something unique and largely devoid of other tourists – but also lacking in all the usual tourist comforts.

Soqatra is a jewel in Yemen's crown: one of the best-preserved, semi-arid tropical islands in the world. The needs of the Soqatran people must be met. But, is rapid and unplanned modernisation the answer? Traditional culture in general deserves protection and support, and Soqatra deserves both urgently.

