

Speech to the IUCN World Conservation Congress, Barcelona, 9/10/2008

*Razan Khalifa Al Mubarak, Managing Director, Emirates Wildlife Society*

Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen,

My name is Razan Khalifa Al Mubarak, and I am the Managing Director of the Emirates Wildlife Society.

However, today I am here in another capacity, representing His Highness Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, the Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi - who outside his official responsibilities in Abu Dhabi and the UAE, is a lifelong wildlife enthusiast and a committed conservationist.

His Highness has asked me to speak on his behalf today to announce the establishment of a significant species conservation initiative, which he hopes will make a genuine contribution to species conservation worldwide.

However, I will get to that in a minute.

Before unveiling the initiative His Highness is launching, I want to explain some of the thinking behind it, and share with you his perspective on the particular challenges facing species and species conservationists in all parts of the world.

Rest assured: I will not be dwelling on the problems and challenges we face for long today.

You know them, you understand them better than anyone, and they've been covered at length during the Forum already.

That said, there is one element of the conservation problem that we do want to expand upon - and that's the unique challenges facing species conservation. And by that I don't mean the threats facing individual species and habitats, but the predicament facing species conservation as a discipline, and its declining status as an environmental priority.

In our view it is not just species, but species conservation as a whole that is under threat and endangered.

As you are all aware, until the 1970s, the conservation movement was dominated by an agenda of species and habitat preservation. At the time, the preservation of charismatic individual species was at the heart of the conservation movement.

During the 1980s the whole discussion around environmental conservation changed its focus, and started to place more emphasis on the impact of development. At the time, several organizations moved away from a traditional focus on species conservation to identify with this newer and significantly broader view of the global conservation debate.

The evolution of conservation to take a more holistic view on the root causes and drivers of environmental degradation is a logical step, and one that has been discussed at length over the past few days.

However, an unintended consequence of focusing on the 'bigger picture' has been the dramatic decline in support for direct species conservation.

As higher-profile and larger priorities emerge, the funding required for conservation efforts across the board is not sufficient. As a result, choices need to be made on where funds are most needed, and where they will have the largest impact.

Too often, species conservation is expected to benefit from the trickle down effect of our efforts to address the world's 'bigger picture' environmental issues - and is not being addressed in its own right.

To turn an old cliché on its head, it seems that when it comes to conservation we are sometimes failing to see the trees for the forest.

The impacts of this on conservation outcomes are well documented, and include:

- A significant lack of funds for direct species conservation initiatives;
- A large proportion of the limited funds available being channeled into important policy work and lobbying, at the expense of on-the-ground initiatives;
- A lack of basic support for people on the front line, such as forest guards and wardens, who often know more about the species under their care than anyone else on the planet;
- And a worrying trend where some critically threatened species are simply being dismissed as beyond help and condemned to premature extinction.

This trend needs to be reversed, and the initiative we announce today is expected to help make that happen.

Recognizing the challenges facing species conservation, His Highness Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, the Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi, is establishing a dedicated fund for the provision of support to individual and coordinated species conservation initiatives.

To retain the species and habitats we treasure, and indeed need, the Mohammed bin Zayed Species Conservation Fund will seek to support the on-the-ground champions of species conservation; the individuals who are dedicated to conserving their local and the world's global threatened species.

The fund will help their work through focused financial support and will nurture the next generation of species conservationists by ensuring the best conservation practices are not lost or forgotten. Through additional events and activities, the fund will also seek to recognize individual leaders in the field of species conservation whose passion and commitment often goes unnoticed, and in doing so, inspire others with an interest in the field of conservation.

I can announce today that the Mohamed bin Zayed Species Conservation Fund will be established with an initial endowment of Twenty Five Million Euros, and will commence operation in January 2009. Individual conservationists will be able to apply for grants from this endowment quickly and easily using the Fund's website, and will be guaranteed of a fast and efficient response.

The fund's focus will be global, and eligibility for grants will extend to all plant and animal species conservation efforts, without discrimination on the basis of region or selected species.

The fund will be open to conservationists around the world, subject to the evaluation of an independent selection committee.

Further information on the fund's activities, including information on how to apply for grants and other support, will be made available at its dedicated website: [www.mbzspeciesconservation.org](http://www.mbzspeciesconservation.org) and through conservation networks as soon as possible.

The Mohamed bin Zayed Species Conservation Fund is only one of the many contributions needed to reverse the species extinction crisis. It will help to conserve species, and will enable hundreds of committed conservationists to continue their work more effectively, and encourage many new conservationists to take their work to the next level.

The potential benefits of this contribution in the longer-term simply can not be measured.

However, above and beyond all of this, it is hoped that the establishment of this fund will stimulate a new conversation on species conservation and biodiversity, that will help to better integrate these priorities with the individual responses currently being pursued to address other environmental issues such as climate change, habitat destruction and sustainable development.

It is hoped that in time, the conservation community will be able to address all of the causes of environmental degradation, without needing to advance one cause at the expense of another. Ultimately, if any one of our initiatives fails, then all of them are far less likely to succeed.

Like the individual species of a complex ecosystem, our individual conservation efforts are more interdependent than we tend to recognize. And the conservation movement as a whole will only ever be as strong as its weakest links.

Through the Mohamed bin Zayed Species Conservation Fund, His Highness is seeking to address one element of the species conservation challenge, and encourage a balanced conservation agenda, in which the importance of species and their preservation is not forgotten.

It is an honour to announce the establishment of this fund to all of you - leaders in the field of species conservation - and we look forward to working with many of you on conservation projects in the future.

Thank you.