



Opening Remarks Her Excellency Raza Khalifa Al Mubarak Managing Director Environment Agency Abu Dhabi	Date: 6 October 2019 IUCN Species Survival Commission Specialists Group Chairs Meeting Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates
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Transcript Follows:

As-Salaam-Alaikum and welcome to Abu Dhabi.

It has been 11 years since we first hosted the IUCN/Species Survival Commission meeting here in the UAE, and this first meeting was a decisive moment for the SSC – it was the first face-to-face meeting of the species survival commission chairs. Since then, the SSC has met in 2012 and 2015 – and again today. Four meetings in 11 years. These meetings allow us to plan and strategize to help save the world’s most endangered species.

That first meeting 11 years ago, was also a decisive moment for Abu Dhabi and its efforts for global species conservation. At that first meeting the seeds for the Mohamed bin Zayed Species Conservation Fund were sown. We learned from you what you needed to help facilitate your species conservation efforts – timely financial support, often in amounts not more than \$25,000, for direct species conservation efforts without significant bureaucratic hurdles or red tape. Since 2009 the Mohamed bin Zayed Species Conservation Fund has supported more than 2,000 grants with almost \$20 million dollars going to 1,300 species and subspecies.

Since then the worldwide environmental narrative has changed, sometimes for the better, but unfortunately, also for the worse.

While globally, there is progress on addressing certain issues such as plastics pollution, climate change awareness and the increasing pressure the youth are placing on the leaders of the World to act decisively and to respond to the challenges of climate change; sadly we have also seen the almost unfettered burning of tropical rainforests and an acceleration in the rate of species extinction. Including species upon which our own survival may well depend, such as the humble honey bee and a myriad of pollinators.

Our initial support to the Species Survival Commission was born from the emotional, spiritual connection of our Nation and its Leaders to nature and its inhabitants. It was not born from a strategic plan or a prioritisation exercise. It was born only from our understanding that there is no future where there is no biodiversity and people.

According to the recent IPBES report, one million animal and plant species are threatened with extinction - more than ever before in human history. It is very interesting to note that the main, immediate threats to species are the same traditional, exacerbated threats that



have endangered species for as long as the conservation movement has been around, over-exploitation, habitat destruction, human-development and all the pressure it puts on nature and biodiversity. Climate change is an added threat, but focussing ONLY on climate change, will not save many species from extinction.

Here in our region, we have seen the effects of this decline first-hand.

After surviving many years in the harsh desert environment, the majestic Saudi Gazelle was declared Extinct by the IUCN in 2008.

In the UAE, the Hawksbill turtle which forages in our waters and nests on our beaches and the Arabian Leopard are both listed as Critically Endangered on the IUCN Red List.

Let us also not be complacent about some of our less endangered species, for example the Hammour – or Orange Spotted Grouper - a staple of our fisheries, while currently classified as “Least Concern” is currently declining in the UAE. The pressures on our biodiversity seem only to increase, and we need to be ever vigilant.

In all my years as a government official tasked to preserve our national environment, I have learned and experienced the needs and challenges to balance and combine development and environmental protection, the need for adequate policies and legal frameworks, the need for international collaborations, the need for qualified people and accurate data.

Abu Dhabi’s efforts have paid off to a degree and our waters are still home to the world’s second largest population of dugong, our scientists and rangers have discovered several new species, and we are protecting more terrestrial and marine biodiversity than ever before, and this all occurred during a time where our country developed tremendously, as many of you that who were here 11 years can attest to today.

Direct and local actions are also a requirement for many species. They cannot survive only through better policies and international agreements. One of our initiatives that we are most proud is the Scimitar-horned Oryx Reintroduction Programme, which has succeeded in bringing this beautiful creature back to its historical home in Chad, where over 200 animals have been reintroduced in less than three years and are now living free again. And this is a species that was listed as Extinct in the Wild on the IUCN Red List. We will be immensely proud when you – the IUCN Species Survival Commission – will determine that it is time to remove that species from this category!

This initiative demonstrates the incredible power of cross-country collaboration to create environmental impact – something the SSC knows a great deal about, too. I mentioned the Red List, as it is undoubtedly the most well-known knowledge product of IUCN, a product that many governments are using to set priorities, plans and invest their



resources wisely. The power of unbiased science-based knowledge is tremendous when applied to guide the development of adequate policies and actions.

After all, conservation transcends borders - and it is the responsibility of us all to work together in securing a future for the next generation and beyond.

At a time when some are questioning the very existence of the environmental threats that are damaging our Earth, we must work to provide unbiased evidence that empowers sound decision-making for the sake of our planet. And we need to do this in a framework where every level of society can engage including governments, civil societies, indigenous communities, and our youth.

EAD is proud of its long-standing partnership with the IUCN. We believe this is an organisation that has so much to offer and our leadership strongly supports the critical efforts of the IUCN.

We all know that if we had to create the IUCN today, as opposed to when it was first created more than 70 years ago, we would probably not be able to do it again given today's divisive political climate. So we must support the IUCN but we must also be aware of its shortfalls and work to improve it and help it stay relevant at a time when it is the most needed.

Nearly 300 Species Survival Commission leaders are attending this meeting in Abu Dhabi – including commission leadership, IUCN headquarters staff and Red List authority co-ordinators.

But worldwide, the effort is much greater. More than 10,000 volunteers are taking part in our activities across over 140 working groups – and together we must make a difference.

Together we can raise awareness of our vital work in protecting the world's most vulnerable species.

And together, we can engage with everyone as we take forward our mission to protect the life that gives us life.

Let us not delay and let us ensure our actions are meaningful and efficient, as extinction is forever.

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