

Fund plants the seeds of survival

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It may not have the majesty of a blue whale nor the mystique of one of the world's most elusive birds, but the humble shrub *Acridocarpus orientalis* could have enough merits to justify funding that will secure its survival in the UAE.

Indeed, the yellow plant is so rare that it can only be found growing on the rocky slopes of Jebel Hafeet.

The shrub may not be the prettiest of flora but it serves a vital purpose. Its seeds are used to relieve headaches and joint pains. The shrub also supports an important butterfly species.

On top of its rarity, the shrub – more commonly known as the qafas or ethout – is also threatened by people visiting the mountain and by the local goat population.

But help is at hand. Dr Taoufik Ksiksi, an associate professor at UAE University, has applied for funding from the Mohammed bin Zayed Species Conservation Fund, launched last year to support conservation work around the world.

He wants to grow the plant and possibly introduce it across the country.

As one of only two projects submitted from the UAE, the initiative is up against hundreds of requests. They include an attempt to save the hirola, a rare antelope only found in Kenya, and searches for the Stresemann's bristlefront, a bird not seen in Brazil since 1995, and the critically endangered bamboo lemur, which lives in Madagascar. These projects have already been approved for funding.

Dr Ksiksi, who specialises in plant ecology, said in his submission to the fund that he would use the money to identify other areas in Abu Dhabi where the qafas might grow and start a nursery, then replant it in other areas so that the shrub will become a common sight.

He should know by the end of next week if he has been successful. Funding would be up to US\$25,000 (Dh92,000).

Nicolas Heard, the fund's manager, hopes that word of Dr Ksiksi's project will reach other scientists in the region, who have so far been less active in pursuing funding compared with their peers from the tropics.

"We have had a few requests from the Arab world but not enough," he says. "If you look at a country like Panama, there is a surprising number of non-governmental organisations working on conservation issues.

"This is not the case in, say, Egypt. There are not that many individuals working in this field. Undoubtedly there is so much more work that needs to be done in this region."

The problem, he believes, could be down to a lack of awareness.

"We here do not live particularly close to nature," he says. "It does not make a daily impact. Often people do not realise what is out there. But I think it [awareness] is coming. I am sure it will."

Both the hirola and the Stresemann's bristlefront are listed as critically endangered by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN).

This means that if the pressure on them is not reduced, soon the only remaining individuals will be living in zoos. The blue whale is listed as endangered.

The odds of survival would be stacked heavily against these species if it were not for groups of scientists working to reverse the negative trends.

The fund, an initiative of Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed, the Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi, was launched last October with Dh130 million reserved for research.

It has already approved more than \$1m (Dh3.67m) worth of grants, two thirds of which is on its way to projects, says Mr Heard. The remainder is expected to reach recipients by the end of the month.

“The idea is to get the money out there and working,” says Mr Heard.

More than 250 conservation organisations and scientists applied for funding this year. About 100 have been approved, some were rejected and the rest will go forward to the next review, scheduled for the autumn.

Applications are reviewed three times a year by a board which comprises six renowned conservationists from the UAE and abroad.

The grants are relatively small, varying between \$5,000 and \$25,000. The reason for this, explains Mr Heard, has to do with the Fund’s intention to provide help quickly with a minimum of bureaucratic hurdles.

“We do not want to put people off,” he says, adding that researchers tracking elusive species in remote areas often lacked the time or resources to go through pages of documents.

“And often it does not need a lot of money. Often \$5,000 is absolutely plenty to support a project.”

Another priority for the fund is for money to be “spent on the ground”, says Mr Heard. “We are not interested in supporting the administrative costs of a non-governmental organisation, or workshops or films about a particular species.”

One successful applicant is the American Bird Conservancy. The charity is collaborating with a Brazilian organisation, Fundação Biodiversitas, to buy a 480-acre farm on Brazil’s Atlantic coast in a small area of forest that is the only place where the Stresemann’s bristlefront is known to exist.

The medium-sized bird went unrecorded for 50 years until a sighting in another area of Brazil in 1995. There have been no subsequent sightings in that area since.

In addition, the bird’s only remaining known habitat is being destroyed by logging, clearances for cattle and agriculture.

“It is the most important site, acre for acre, in the Americas for threatened birds, with more threatened species per unit area than any other site in the western hemisphere,” says Michael Parr, the vice president of the American Bird Conservancy.

There are amphibians and invertebrates in the area which, says Mr Heard, “are suffering because they do not get a lot of public attention”.

If Dr Ksiksi’s bid is successful, the qafas may be in line for some much-needed attention soon.