

THE LOST ORYX

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The Arabian Oryx has been considered an animal of beauty by the people of the Arabian Peninsula for centuries. With its oversized horns and elegant body, the antelope holds huge cultural significance in the Gulf. Being the largest antelope in the area it has a remarkable tenacity to survive in one of the most inhospitable natural environments in the world. Unfortunately, modernisation wiped out the Arabian Oryx in the wild but there could be hope for this magnificent animal, yet. This photo essay tells the story of one the region's most majestic creatures and the efforts of conservationists in the country to give the Arabian Oryx another chance to flourish in its original homeland.

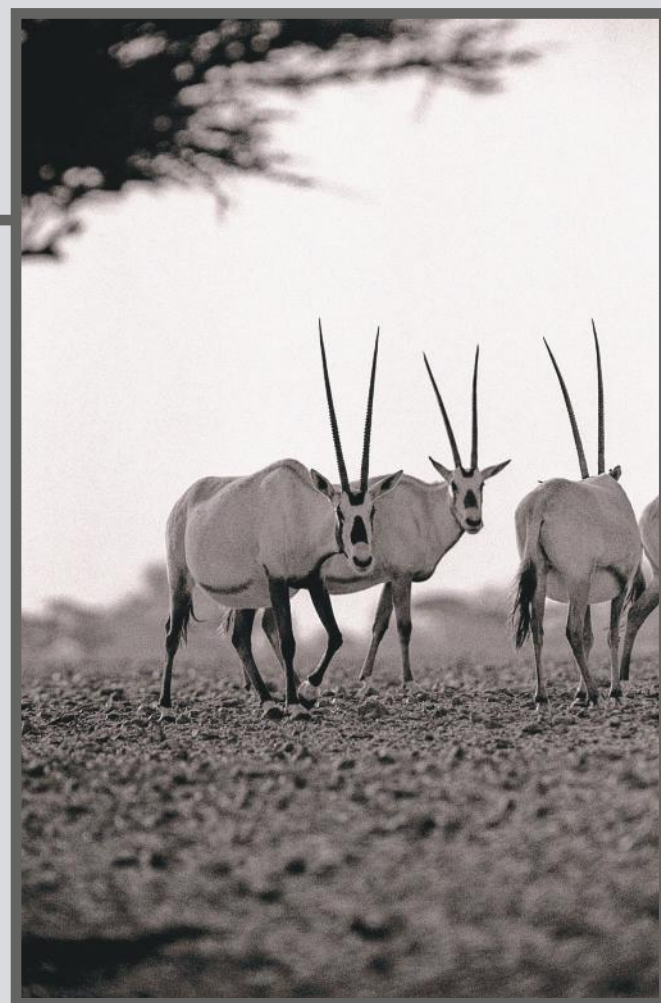
The Arabian Oryx has held symbolic value for the people of the Middle East for centuries. It is thought that the mythical unicorn creature was developed from the animal's characteristics. In profile, the Oryx appears to have one horn and the Hebrew word 're'em' may have been translated as 'unicorn'.





The Arabian Oryx's body is perfectly suited for life in the desert. Its small hooves mould well into soft sand while its body can tolerate a rise in temperature up to 40°C. The animal can also go without a water source for periods of up to four months, relying instead on the dew collected from plants and shrubs that forms its staple diet.

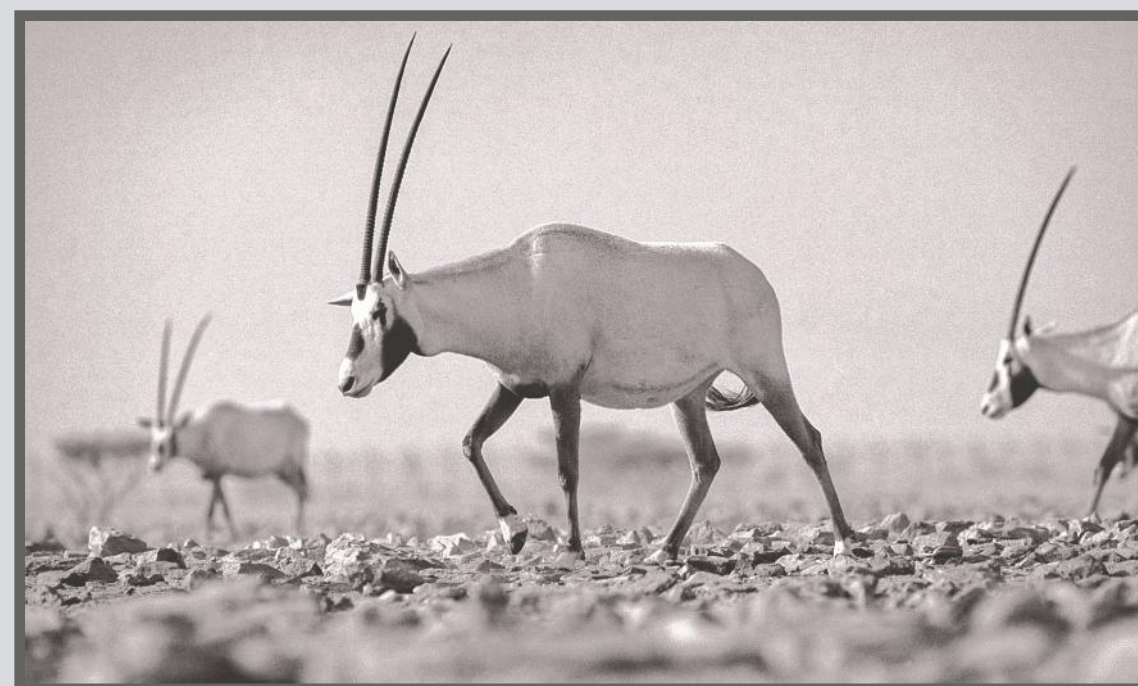
In 1972, Oman's last wild Oryx was shot dead by a hunting party on the edge of the Empty Quarter. Hunting, with high-powered rifles and 4X4 vehicles, devastated Oman's Arabian population throughout the 1960s despite the best efforts of the government to ban the sport. Most hunting parties came from neighbouring countries.



There was hope for the Arabian Oryx when in 1982 the species was reintroduced to Oman's Jiddat al-Harasis region. Initially 10 Oryx from San Diego were brought to Oman and by 1997 their numbers had grown to over 400. The Arabian Oryx Sanctuary was set up for their protection.



From 1997 the Arabian Oryx was once again hunted. This time the animal was the target of poachers who captured and then sold the Oryx to private collectors in the region. Others were hunted purely for their meat. By 2007, the number of wild Arabian Oryx left in Oman had plummeted to around 20 heads.



Thankfully, the Arabian Oryx has recovered from incidents of poaching in recent years. The number of wild Oryx in Oman has risen to 59 and there are still some 320 captive animals in the country. It is hoped that better policing and the fencing of certain areas of the sanctuary will help the Arabian Oryx flourish once again in the country.

It is hoped that the Arabian Oryx Sanctuary will be promoted regionally and internationally in the coming years making it a popular ecotourism destination. This in turn should help the local community and push through new scientific and environmental studies on the animal and its habitat. It will undoubtedly provide the impetus for authorities to crack down on poachers, and invest in the sustainability of the wild population.



Contact 99348022 to find out how you can visit the Arabian Oryx Sanctuary. Special thanks to all at the Arabian Oryx Sanctuary, UNESCO and Dr. Khalid Juma AlRabsi from the Omani Wild Animals Breeding Centre.