

Editorial

One perennial feature of research into the natural history and environment of any country is that there are always new discoveries to be made – the identification of species not previously recorded in a country, or the extension of known range or even if one is especially dedicated and fortunate, the discovery of a species that is not just new for a country, but new for science. That is part of the fascination and challenge. In a country like the United Arab Emirates, where research only really got under way less than fifty years ago, this is particularly true. Several of the papers in this issue of *Tribulus* document discoveries of new species for the Emirates, including two geckoes, a snake, a damselfly, a grass and a moth – sufficient evidence, if any was needed, that there is still scope for new finds. Another paper documents a previously-unrecorded feature of animal behaviour – the attraction of caterpillars to mercury vapour lights at night, something that is of international scientific significance. It's worth pointing out, too, that while some of the discoveries were made by professional scientists, others have been made by dedicated and well-informed amateurs, even if they have been helped in the process of identification by professionals.

It is always the case, moreover, that the current state of knowledge is open to amendment, as a result of such new discoveries and that it is possible to supplement previously-published data. It is a pleasure, therefore, to be able to include an updated checklist of the country's damselflies, not merely adding a new species but also other new information.

Since it was launched in 1991, nearly twenty years ago, *Tribulus* has sought to become a place where such discoveries may be reported and it is pleasing to note the presence of so many papers of this type in the current issue.

While the papers mentioned above deal with individual species or groups of species of flora and fauna, it is also important, of course, to study the habitats in which they are found, not simply as a backdrop, but in themselves. While there is now a considerable amount of information about the UAE's habitats in general, little has been published, as far as we are aware, on specific locations. This issue attempts to make a start on that process with studies of the geology of two of our important, but privately-owned, offshore islands. Further studies will follow as well as, we hope, broader papers or groups of papers looking at particular habitats and at the flora and fauna to be found within them. There is much available only in 'grey', unpublished reports produced as a result of commissioned consultancy

surveys devoted to particular areas that is worthy of publication. As the picture of the country's natural and biological diversity as a whole becomes better known, there is, increasingly, a need for such locally-based studies to appear.

When *Tribulus* commenced publication, the UAE appeared only rarely in international scientific journals and there was little being done in terms of original research into natural history, at least, even if topics such as archaeology were being extensively examined. As is evident from the lengthy bibliography in this issue of recently-published books and papers, there is now a wide variety of research being undertaken, both by professionals and by enthusiastic and informed amateurs. As is also evident, much of this is now being undertaken by official organisations that simply did not exist a couple of decades ago.

It is disappointing that, in some cases at least – as is clear from some of the book reviews in this issue – that insufficient recognition is given to the previous and current work of those researchers outside the official or officially-sponsored bodies. Nor are publications from official bodies automatically subjected to a peer review process, as a result of which the academic quality of published material is not always as high as it might be. For these problems to be addressed effectively, there is a need for greater collaboration and exchange of information between the official bodies, other professional scientists, in the local academic community for example, as well as for short-term visitors from academic institutions overseas, and the informed and dedicated amateur researcher. We are pleased to note that this failing is now being addressed, the Memorandum of Understanding between the voluntary Emirates Bird Records Committee and the official Environment Agency – Abu Dhabi, EAD, being one particularly good example, but there is scope for much more collaboration of this kind. The creation of some kind of national scientific research council, perhaps under the sponsorship of the federal Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research or the Ministry of Environment and Water, with which the whole range of researchers could be involved, might be one way of proceeding at a national level.

Finally, an apology is due for the late appearance of this issue, both to our readers and to those contributors who have been waiting many months for their papers to be published. Work on the next issue is already well under way!

Peter Hellyer