

focus



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Emirates Natural History Group

Patron: H.E. Sheikh Nahayan bin Mubarak Al Nahayan

EDITORIAL

The heat is back! The evening trip to Qarn Nazwa was the last of the official ENHG field trips this season. However, do continue visiting the great outdoors. The evenings and early mornings are lovely, and camping is still very comfortable in the mountains. If anyone wants to volunteer to lead a camping trip to the mountains of the Musandam or Jebel Akhdar, I am sure this would be much appreciated by those staying over the summer months. There is still a range of ENHG activities including lectures, the end of season social gathering on 9 June, the forthcoming World Environment Day (5 June...see EMEG invitation) and possibly a pearling experience with Major Ali (TBA). It is always something of a relief to have the accounts duly audited and the AGM safely out of the way! We are really most grateful to Eila for her excellent treasuring and Nick Bengé for auditing the accounts (yet again). We have two new committee members: Feng Wen and Cath Ware, and we look forward to working with them.

Drew Gardner

Looking for Turtles at EMEG Reserve



A briefing with Major Ali at the Manama

Photo: Jan Fisher

On 1 May, at the invitation of Major Ali Al Suweidi, about 25 members of the ENHG and DNHG gathered at the EMEG beach reserve for a chance to observe turtles laying eggs one month into the season this year. For the past five years, EMEG have been monitoring the green and hawksbill turtles that return to these beaches to lay their eggs between March and June. We didn't see any turtles, but we had a good time, as always.

Those who came on Friday afternoon enjoyed a viewing of the EMEG video presentation, swimming and beachside barbecues. At high tide, at about 8 pm, we gathered for a briefing at the Manama — the covered outdoor meeting platform. Major Ali cautioned us to walk silently, without lights. He divided us into two groups, each carrying a camera, a GPS unit, and a night-vision infrared scope. Our group drove about 10 km to the right of EMEG and walked quietly several km back along the beach, finding small globs of blue phosphorescent algae glowing on the sand, but no turtles.

On the way back, Major Ali took our group by the local fox den. We tried to peer inside but found the entrance cleverly screened by a piece of dead bush. Because the foxes have eaten 300 turtle eggs so far, the EMEG crew

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FRONT COVER PICTURE

Photograph: Harlequin Bug, Lygaeus equestris, on Gaillonia, at Wadi Tarabat (base of Jebel Hafit), 13 March 2009

Photographer: Will Bevington

This month's contributors

Will Bevington, Jan Fisher, Dick Hornby, Patricia MacLachlan, Sharjah Aquarium, Keith Taylor, May Yoke Taylor, Vesela Todorova of *The National*, Anf Ziadat

have been translocating turtle eggs to well-fenced enclosures near EMEG HQ, measuring carefully to ensure that they are buried at the correct depth. At that time, one fox had been humanely trapped and relocated to an inland reserve. NB: As of 10 May, a total five foxes, including the young ones, have been relocated.

At 5 am Saturday, Major Ali led a group of us overnight campers on another turtle recce (having also gone out at 1 am). Neither he nor we nor the foxes found any turtle eggs that day, but I have now been told that three nests have since been found and protected (as of 10 May).

Major Ali expressed relief that work on Waterfront and Palm Jebel Ali projects is now on hold, as it is giving the coral a chance to bounce back. Coral conservation along a 15 km stretch is an important part of EMEG's long-term mission. On 10 May, Major Ali reported that he had just seen the release of millions of eggs by the reef's Brain Coral — the first this year — a truly inspiring and reassuring sight!

Major Ali also mentioned a book he's writing on the history of pearl divers, full of details of their arduous lives. This is a story that is very much a part of him; in fact, while walking down the beach, he'll stop and pick something up and talk about how pearl divers made use of it. A pearl-diving-experience weekend may be on offer to interested ENHG members during the next month or two. Watch your In-box for updates on this and other EMEG events. And to see about arranging a group visit to EMEG, contact Uta Meyer at uta@emeg.ae.

Keith Taylor

NB: The promised reprints of winning photos from IEW 2009, along with several IEW trip reports, will appear in a special summer (July/August) edition of Focus. Also watch out for June Focus, coming very soon! -Ed.

Underwater with Kerwin Porter

We were very lucky with the traffic on our 21 March journey to Sharjah. Anticipating congestion, we set out from Popeyes at 7am on a fine March Saturday morning but in a little over two hours had arrived in Sharjah with sufficient time to spare to make a quick visit to the city's excellent museum of archaeology before moving on to our mid morning appointment with Kerwin Porter, curator of the new Sharjah Aquarium.

Sharjah Aquarium celebrates the marine species native to the seas around the UAE. This latest addition to the growing family of Sharjah museums is housed in a seafront building that is impressively light and airy with all the facilities needed for a family visit including activities for children, an inexpensive café and a waterfront terrace. Its partner museum, the Maritime Museum Sharjah, will showcase the lives of Emirati seafarers, including an oral history of pearl culture, and when it opens will complete a complex that has already attracted half a million visitors this year.

The main tank holds 1.5m litres of sea water and is 6m deep, with a coral garden, rock pool and swamp areas to provide spaces for the diverse inhabitants of the beaches, lagoons, mangroves and open ocean of the UAE. The species there range from seahorses and tiny clown fish to moray eels, rays and reef sharks.

Kerwin came to the UAE from a background with London museums as well as a passion for diving. He and members of his educational team guided us on a behind-the-scenes tour that gave an insight into the challenges of maintaining the aquarium as a safe and diverse environment for the 250 species to whom it is home. We started with the unit devoted to keeping the water clean. The water source is the sea, and this itself presents challenges in terms of pollution, toxicity and temperature. The construction of Palm Island in Dubai has shifted the beach and water flow in Sharjah and has also affected the water chemistry. The best temperature for the aquarium animals is a regulated 26 degrees, but seawater can reach 46 degrees. The acidity of seawater is being affected by global warming. The PH of seawater should be 8, but it is falling in the Gulf.

In order to create and sustain a suitable environment for the sea creatures, the aquarium water unit uses a variety of measures to clean the water including sand pressure machines that trap dirt in the sand before circulating the water into the aquarium, UV light to sterilise the water and carbon filters.

Our guides also explained the regulation of diet that is deployed in the aquarium including the quantities of seaweed needed, the calcium sources added to the vertebrates' tanks for their bones, the carotenoids needed by particular species and the tablets that have to be commissioned to ensure that the sharks do not get thyroid trouble!

On our tour of the public area of the aquarium, the coral gardens were particularly impressive, as was the variation in lighting, including the use of black light for the coral and jelly fish. Kerwin's impassioned explanation, as a keen diver, of the extensive number of coral types and the benefits of this biodiversity was particularly striking. The medical uses that are now being found for coral, ranging from bone reconstruction surgery to research into antibiotic properties that are proving more effective than terrestrial antibiotics, illustrate the importance of this resource and, by the same token, what we will lose if the red tide on the UAE's east coast kills the coral by blocking the sunlight essential for its nourishment.



Clownfish and Anemone

Photo: May Yoke Taylor

One surprise exhibit for those who visit at the right time is the guide who spends some of his weekends diving into the tank to take photographs of visitors, giving a new meaning to the expression 'a fish eye lens'.



'Fish eye lens' photo highlighting author Patricia and trip leader Andrew, with guide Kerwin on the right

Photo: Sharjah Aquarium

These behind-the-scenes tours are recommended for enhancing a visit to the aquarium, and they take place on the third Saturday of each month. Places can be booked through info@sharjahaquarium.ae.

Patricia MacLachlan

Caracals being hunted to the brink of extinction

We reprint below, with permission, an article that first appeared in *The National* on 18 March, 2009. –Ed.

A weekend outing into the remote Hajar Mountains brought Richard Hornby, a resident of Abu Dhabi, face to face with a grim sight: the bodies of nine dead caracals hanging from the branches of a tree.

Caracals – medium-sized, extraordinarily agile cats – are increasingly rare mountain predators that have been hunted to the brink of extinction in the UAE, and Mr Hornby's discovery, in the vicinity of the Tawian Dam, was a vivid illustration of the threat to their survival.

Some of the animals looked as if they had been killed up to two years ago, said Mr Hornby, while others may have died as recently as January this year. "It is a tree that someone has been adding to over a long period," he said.



Caracals hanging from a tree

Photo: Dick Hornby

Along with other rare and endangered species such as Arabian leopards and desert foxes, caracals are regarded as threats by many mountain residents, and in the wake of Mr Hornby's discovery wildlife officials are calling for education programmes and conservation projects to help save the endangered species.

"It is time that there was a resumption of serious efforts by both local and federal agencies to educate the population of the mountains and to promote further research and active conservation related to species such as the Arabian leopard, caracal and others," said Peter Hellyer, a naturalist and co-editor of *The Emirates: A Natural History*.

"It is quite difficult to make people realise these are endangered species," said Dr Christophe Tourenq, manager for science and research at the Emirates Wildlife Society – World Wildlife Fund for Nature. "It is a recurrent problem that is present not only here." Dr Tourenq said that while the number of carcasses discovered by Mr Hornby was high considering the caracal is a rare and extremely shy creature, the

practice of hanging them from a tree was nothing new. He said: "I am not particularly surprised. This has been observed in the UAE even with leopards. It is a common practice when people kill a predator like that to hang it from a tree or a pole. There is a need to go and meet these people."

While the Arabian leopard is the most threatened species – some conservationists believe it is already extinct – the caracal and the small, agile Blanford's fox are also high on Dr Tourenq's list of UAE predators whose numbers are dwindling alarmingly.

Caracals feed mainly on birds, rodents and reptiles, but they sometimes prey on chickens and goats, and conservationists think the nine were probably killed by mountain residents who see them as a threat to their own livelihoods and do not understand their importance to the ecosystem.

"People think there is no value in these animals," said Dr Saif al Ghais, executive director of the Environment Protection and Development Authority of Ras al Khaimah. "They do not understand biodiversity ... They must feel these animals are their asset."

There are a few wildlife awareness programmes in the UAE, but they target mostly children and there is no campaign to educate residents of remote parts of the country.

Wildlife authorities point to the Arabian Leopard Trust, which educated city dwellers as well as mountain tribesmen about conservation in the 1990s, as an example of how a wildlife survival campaign can succeed in the UAE. The initiative raised enough money for a leopard breeding programme, which later provided the foundation for the government-sponsored Sharjah Breeding Centre for Endangered Arabian Wildlife.

Vesela Todorova - vtodorova@thenational.ae

Comment

I think it is terribly sad that anyone would firstly kill these animals and then be so proud, ignorant and disdainful of the law as to want to hang them in a tree for public display. One wonders whether it is one individual, a family or a whole community that indulges in this misguided behaviour. Certainly, there is an obligation on the RAK government to investigate the matter and at least try to educate those involved, if not prosecute. Both would help to spread the word that such actions are unacceptable.

Caracals are almost certainly present in Wadi Wurrayah and we can only hope that the protected area status will help in protecting them. It should help to provide resources for dialogue with local people, which can only be a good thing. They must embrace the idea that the caracal population is an important and valuable resource that they should not threaten. If protection of the area leads to more tourists, there is more scope for local people to make some money from visitors. Perhaps both the carrot and the stick should be used.

Dick Hornby

NB: See link to recent article in *The National* on the protected status of Wadi Wurrayah—this issue p. 8. –Ed.

Wildlife in the Carpark

This item is the latest in a series of articles kicked off by Dick Hornby's 'Wildlife at the Doorstep' in the April 2008 issue of Focus, nudging us to keep an eye out for wildlife sightings close to home, even in an urban setting. –Ed.

I am reminded of a nature encounter my wife and I had in June of 2006, a few days before our summer holidays. Late one evening as we were getting into our car in the ADCO carpark opposite our then-apartment on Khaleej al Arabi, my wife took a sudden detour and returned to the car with something emitting a shrill cheeping sound. It was a fledgling Red-vented Bulbul which had undoubtedly fallen from an overhanging tree.

For ten days, we hand-fed this bird with a bird feed mash we got from the British Vets. Occasionally we left it out on our balcony in its cage for some fresh air. On the day of our departure we gave it to a neighbor working at the British Vets. She told us later that she had "weaned" it off hand-feeding and got it pecking food on its own. She then successfully released it from her balcony—to an uncertain fate in a neighborhood of prowling alley cats—but at least a chance at a natural life.



"Feed me!"

Photo: May Yoke Taylor

Then that following winter—a couple of days before Christmas—a Red-vented Bulbul with its perky crested black cap perched on our balcony for a long minute, peering around, as if to say, "I remember this place". As it was the only time a bird of that species had visited our balcony (we always had pigeons, but never bulbuls) we took it as a Christmas gift that "Chico", as we called it/him/her, had indeed survived and had paid us a visit.



Adult Red-Vented Bulbul, *Pycnonotus cafer*

Photo: Dick Hornby

Keith Taylor

21 April Solid Waste Presentations

At our meeting on Earth Day, 21 April, Dr. Anf Ziadat, Civil Engineering professor at HCT, Abu Dhabi Men's College, accompanied by two of his students in the BSc program, gave a very engaging and informative series of presentations on the critical issue of Solid Waste Management, focusing in on the systems for minimizing disposed waste under development in the UAE.

Dr. Ziadat began his presentation with the "upside-down pyramid" of waste management, stressing that the broad top represents "Reducing", followed by "Reuse", "Recycling", and "Disposal", and that by focusing on the first three issues we can bring the bottom bit (currently way out of proportion in countries like the UAE) down to where it should be. Figures given for the present amount of waste generated per person per day: UAE 2.1 kg; USA 2 kg; Seoul 2 kg; Australia 1.87 kg; Paris 1.43 kg; UK 1.4 kg; Mexico City 0.8 kg; and Bangalore & the Philippines 0.4 kg. Obviously, efficient management of this waste, especially in the locales at the top of the list, is a must for maintaining a healthy natural environment.

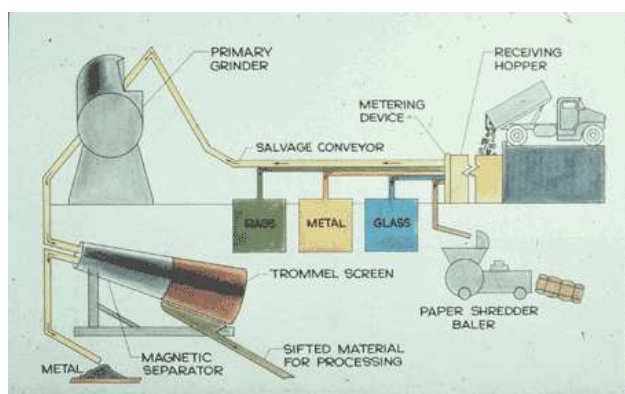
Dr. Ziadat then presented his paper, *Assessing solid waste recycling opportunities for closed campuses* (full text available online). A highlight of this presentation was a photo of him at the garbage collection center at Ellsworth Air Force base in S. Dakota, dressed in a white clean suit, "dumpster diving" with a crew of local students, in order to sort out the rubbish into various types of recyclables. Using the incentive of waiving utility bills to enlist the support of the base residents, he demonstrated that there was real money to be made by that particular "closed campus" by the sale of recyclables, and he demonstrated that the rate of landfill use could be drastically reduced this way. His talk also included some quite educational slides on what it takes to create and maintain a landfill, with great care taken to prevent harmful materials from leaching into the surrounding subsoil.

Dr. Ziadat's students, Mohammed bin Braik and Ibrahim Serham Al Hamoudi, followed up his informative main lecture with very nicely done PowerPoint presentations that they had prepared as one of the components of their senior projects in the BSc program in Civil Engineering, which they are just now on the verge of completing. These presentations were quite impressively put together and very efficiently delivered.

The first, by Mohammed bin Braik, focused on the various categories of waste and the current state of their disposal, reuse, or recycling in the UAE. Management of medical waste, requiring high-tech safe disposal techniques, was one of the issues that stood out as needing to be urgently addressed, with the development of many new hospitals in the works. Also highlighted was the savings in financial and environmental costs to be had by the reuse of building materials from all the fairly new to relatively old (20 to 25 yr old) buildings constantly being replaced here. He stressed that construction waste was 10 million tons in 2006 and in 2008 was 27.7 million tons – a steeply escalating percentage. Dubai has been looking for a comprehensive solution to the problem of excessive waste hastened by the increase in construction; hence

the development of the Emirates Recycling Plant in Jebel Ali, which became operational in 2008. Construction & development waste must now be sent to the plant. Of this waste: 14% is wood; 35% asphalt; 19% building materials; 24% concrete and 7% "other". There should be no stockpiling of incoming waste materials since it's processed as it comes in, reducing the reliance on freshly quarried construction materials. NB: see link to article on constr. waste, p. 8 this issue.

The presentation by the second student, Ibrahim Al Hamoudi, was about the model waste disposal system in use/under development in his home town of Al Ain. Ibrahim pointed out that of the total population at present (429,000) 40% is Emirati—much higher than the main cities in the UAE. He also emphasized that of the total area of Al Ain (13,608 sq km), 519 sq km is taken up by farms. The large number of farms there has produced an opportunity for composting on a huge scale, which is apparently quite successful. Al Ain's rather large problem of "fallen stock" (2,000 tons/yr) will be solved by incineration, but the incinerator for that purpose has not yet been built. Ibrahim figured that the equivalent of 289 barrels/day of oil could be saved if the energy from the incineration could be used to generate electricity. Most of the other types of waste generated in Al Ain are sorted through a collection center by means of a mechanical sorting process, The MRF, the Material Recovery Facility, located next to the landfill. This results in a large percentage of recycled material. Projections indicated that the integrated disposal system currently under refinement has the potential of reducing the material sent to the landfill down to 30% of the actually discarded material.



The sorting process at an MRF

Diagram submitted by Dr. Anf Ziadat

One key component of the MRF is the Density Separation (Air Classification) unit, which separates light materials such as paper and plastic from heavy materials such as metals based on weight difference in the air stream. In solid waste the light fraction is typically organic while the heavy fraction is typically inorganic. It is also quite useful for separating commingled glass and plastic. The other key component is the Magnetic Separation unit, which separates ferrous metals from the waste stream utilizing magnetic principals. It is primarily used to separate commingled steel and aluminum. During Q&A, Dr. Z pointed out that glass waste poses a particular problem here in the UAE. The mechanism to separate it from other waste is in place, but there's no market for it here. Another problem for glass recycling is

the need to separate the different colours of bottles caused by differing additives added to the glass.

One of the first questions from the audience was about the possibility of introducing sorting of recyclables at source in this country, as it is currently done in many places in the developed world. The response was that proper education about this issue across the society has to start with the younger generation, and various initiatives are tackling this. In a related comment, Molly McQuarrie said that in the course of a recycling project at her school they are finding it quite challenging to get the kids to dispose of plastics and organic material in separate containers in the cafeteria, but they are persevering, nonetheless. Dr. Ziadat then pointed out that (contrary to the usual findings) effective efforts for garbage segregation and reducing, reusing and recycling MUST begin with the MOTHERS. He stressed that even school efforts will not make a large change unless the MOTHERS are brought on board through outreach efforts, and door to door interviews and education. Mothers are key to reducing ORGANIC WASTE. We found this comment and conclusion on his part startling because it is so different from all other habit changing initiatives, which usually stress the schools as the avenue of change – smoking, anti drug campaigns, traffic safety, fire safety, etc. He said his own research has borne out that family is the root of everything and what has been taught at home is more important than what is taught at school. See Dr. Anf Ziadat's article – *Major factors contributing to environmental awareness among people in a third world country/Jordan* online at <http://www.citeulike.org/article/4111500>.

In retrospect, several of us in who were in attendance on 21 April feel that the two Emirati student presenters could be very effective speakers to students at schools in the UAE – and also to staff at concerned companies. We wish these speakers all the best in the furtherance of their careers in this vitally important field.

Keith Taylor / Molly McQuarrie

Recent Speaker

Christopher Novack was educated in the United States and is currently a registered professional engineer specializing in transportation development and operations. Prior to joining the Masdar project in Abu Dhabi, Chris spent the past twenty years leading the development of one of the most successful port facilities in the United States, which included container transfer facilities, cruise terminals and port infrastructure. His task as the transportation program manager for CH2M HILL at Masdar is to coordinate the successful delivery of the multi-layered and innovative transportation system for what is being designed to be a carbon neutral city, now under development near the Abu Dhabi airport.

On 5 May Chris Novack introduced Masdar City with a short video, and gave us a graphic presentation that helped us visualize how this state-of-the-art computer-controlled transportation system might actually work. Thanks to Chris for an informative presentation and for generating and gamely fielding so many questions! We look forward to a field trip to Masdar when the first phase is open—which is planned, in fact, for this coming Sept.



PRT - Personal Rapid Transport system pod
A key component of the multi-layered system at Masdar

Many of us were first introduced to the Masdar City transportation plan in the following article, **People carrier**, by Ivan Gale, published in *The National* on 24 January, 2009. It can be accessed via this link: <http://www.thenational.ae/article/20090124/MOTORING/451141489/1196>.

Next speaker



Steve James is a lifelong bird-watcher whose love for birds, birding and wild places is infectious to those around him. He has travelled extensively throughout the world, amassing a world list of just over 4,600 species. He has been resident in the UAE since 1992, and his UAE bird list is above 400 species. He is a member of the Emirates Bird Records Committee, and he is available as a bird-guide on trips throughout the UAE and into Oman. Between birding trips, Steve is the Senior Environmental Protection Officer for ADCO.

Steve is also a Bish Brown Award winner and past Chairman of the ENHG, who continues to entertain and inform the group with beautifully illustrated and humorously anecdotal talks from time to time. Most recently, in September 2006, he spoke to us about wildlife in South Africa, where he owns a house on a game reserve. On 19 May he will be presenting photos of interest to naturalists from his very recent trip to North-East India.

The Editor thanks the above speakers for providing autobiographical info. & photos for Focus.

ITEMS ON SALE

AT THE ENHG STALL

All prices are in dirhams.

- The Emirates – A Natural History, 350.
The first complete referencing guide to the wildlife of the UAE. 580 colour photos.
- Jebel Hafit – A Natural History, 100.
An attractive, encyclopaedic presentation of the natural resources of this local landmark.
(Free copies available to schools. Ask Chairman.)
- Terrestrial Environment of Abu Dhabi Emirate, 240.
- Marine Environment and Resources of Abu Dhabi, 140.
- Seashells of Eastern Arabia, 120.
- Abu Dhabi Bird checklist, 10.
- Emirates Bird Report, 50.
- Oman Bird List, ed 6, 30.
- Birdwatching guide to Oman, 2nd edition, 100.
Guide to bird watching spots in Oman.
- The Birds of Al Jabal Al Akhdar, 50.
- Trucial States, 150.
- Falconry, 60.
- Native Plants of Oman, 80.
- Snakes of Arabia, 50.
- Pests, 35. *Find out what's in and around your home.*
- Reef Fishes of the UAE, 50.
- Snorkeling and Diving in Oman, 50.
- Comprehensive Guide to the Wildflowers of the UAE, 100.
- Feast of Dates, 100.
- UAE in Focus, 100.
- Sir Bani Yas, 100.
- Musandam, 100.
- On-road in the UAE, 50.
- Off-road in the UAE II, 50.
- Off-road in Oman, 50.
- Abu Dhabi 8 million years ago, 15.
- Natural History of Oman, 90.
- Discovering Qatar, 120.
- Arabian Sands, 90.

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Lectures

Venue: HCT-ADMC

21st April
Assessing Solid Waste
Recycling Opportunities
for Closed Campuses
Dr. Anf H. Ziadat
Municipal Solid Waste
Management in the
UAE
*Ibrahim Al Hamoudi /
Mohamed Bin Braik*

5th May
Multi-Layered
Transportation System
in Masdar City
Chris Novack

19th May **7:30 PM**
Extreme Northeast
India
Steve James

2 June **7:30 PM**
Buhais 18: Life and
Death in the Stone Age
Emma Thompson

16 June **7:30 PM**
Marine Life of the UAE
& Oman, Part III
Gordon Kirkwood

Social Event

9th June
Social gathering at the
rooftop bar at The Oryx
Hotel, Khalidiya

Field Trips

1st May
Turtle spotting at
EMEG reserve
Michael Creamer

8th May
Afternoon/evening trip
to Qarn Nizwa to spot
bats and geckos, etc.
Drew Gardner

In the Local News Media

Natural Paradise gets protection: [Wadi Wurrayah]
<http://www.thenational.ae/article/20090428/PAGETHRE/704279804/1022/NATIONAL>

A young lion's escape from pain:
<http://www.thenational.ae/article/20090504/PAGETHRE/905039986/1119/FOREIGN>

Construction waste piles ever higher:
<http://www.thenational.ae/article/20090413/NATIONAL/824411504/1022>

Websites of General Interest

ENHG-AA Website; Archives: 3 newsletters, Tribulus
<http://www.enhg.org>

Qatar NHG website:
<http://www.qnhg.org>

Wildlife Middle East News:
<http://www.wmenews.com>

Arabian Wildlife:
<http://www.arabianwildlife.com/main.htm>

Tommy Pedersen's UAE Birding Site:
www.uaebirding.com

Hanne & Jens Eriksen's Birds Oman website:
www.BirdsOman.com

Emirates Marine Environmental Group:
www.emeg.ae

Dubai Astronomy Group:
<http://www.dubaiastronomy.com>

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Postal Address

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Newsletter Details

Newsletter contributions to: newsletter@chirri2000.com

Yahoo Groups website

<http://uk.groups.yahoo.com/group/AUHENHG>