

## EDITORIAL

Although this issue of *Tribulus* is somewhat delayed, for which the editorial board offers its apologies, the delay does permit us to comment on the 2006-2007 winter weather, which has seen the best rainfall in the United Arab Emirates for a decade or so. Rains began in November 2006 with regular downpours still occurring four months later and, rather than being a widely-spaced collection of torrential downpours, these rains have been relatively frequent and often fairly steady, lasting for hours, thus permitting them to penetrate deep into the subsoil. They have, moreover, been widespread, with not only the Northern Emirates, including the Hajar Mountains, receiving rain, but also the desert areas to the west and south-west of Abu Dhabi, where rains are generally less frequent and less substantial. Offshore islands too have benefited, permitting the regeneration of vegetation after many years of drought.

Proper statistics on the 2006-2007 rains will, no doubt, be compiled and published in due course, but observers have commented happily on the diversity and profusion of the flora that emerged from a healthy seedbank after these rains, much more extensive than has been the case in recent years. Although less easy to record, the populations of our smaller fauna, too, will have benefited.

Besides the abundance of the flora, there have been other benefits from the rains, with fieldwork, often undertaken as part of environmental impact assessments for development projects, noting range extensions for a number of species that do not always appear during years of drought. One chance, but welcome, find was that of a species of annual grass new to the Emirates, reported in this issue by Gary Brown, Simon Aspinall and Drew Gardner, and whose nearest known location is several hundred kilometres away in Kuwait. The discovery of new species for the Emirates, whether of fauna or of flora, is always welcomed. However much fieldwork is undertaken, there are always new discoveries to be made.

Sadly, the area in which the new grass was discovered, the sand dunes fringing Umm al-Qaiwain's Khor al-Beida, is now scheduled, in part at least, for a major development project, one of several that are affecting the UAE's coastline, in particular. Although the Environment Agency - Abu Dhabi, EAD, continues to press for the designation of particular areas as nature reserves, and has recently recorded another success with the designation of a new marine reserve just to the west of the island of Abu Dhabi, there is still little sign that such a process is getting under way in any effective manner in much of the rest of the country. One result, inevitably, is that scientific data is being lost before it has ever been recorded and populations of certain groups put at risk, or worse.

The only consolation, if it truly is one, is that the various environmental impact assessments being carried out, to a

greater or lesser degree, on the development projects do provide an opportunity to record information - even if major discoveries cannot always be guaranteed protection or effective mitigation measures to ensure their survival. Thus EIAs carried out in Sharjah and Umm al-Qaiwain have added very significantly to our knowledge of the Diptera (flies) of the Emirates, and we are delighted to carry an up-to-date checklist of the UAE's Diptera by Brigitte Howarth in this issue which includes information from those EIAs. Encouragingly, the Sharjah site, the Wasit Nature Reserve, is now formally protected - we only wish that some other areas of major importance to our flora and fauna could enjoy the same level of protection. It is, of course, inevitable that the current pace of development means that areas of environmental importance will disappear under bulldozers and concrete. We continue to wonder, though, why so little action is taken in much of the country to recognise, and to preserve, areas that, on the basis of detailed studies, both past and present, have long-been flagged up as being of major environmental importance, often internationally so. We wish the Ministry of Environment and Water and the various local environmental agencies good luck in their efforts, often highly frustrating - and frustrated - to preserve more of the country's biodiversity.

Besides the two papers already mentioned, this issue of *Tribulus* contains the usual eclectic mix of material, covering a wide range of the UAE's heritage and environment. Our lead paper, by Michele Ziolkowski and Abdullah Suhail al-Sharqi, offers a detailed historical and ethnographical study of one of the country's best-known ancient landmarks, the fortified house and compound in Wadi Hayl in Fujairah. We are pleased to note that the second author is a UAE citizen, and we look forward to receiving more submissions of papers by Emiratis in the future.

We should record, though, that although the authors, and others, have undertaken detailed studies of this important complex, the current programme of 'restoration' has signally failed to pay much attention to those studies and has, instead, involved the creation of architectural features which were not there in the original building.

Our final major paper is also on a natural history topic, with Gary Feulner and Richard Hornby offering a major review of the inter-tidal molluscs to be found on our coastlines. We hope that the paper will encourage others to embark on their own studies, for, as the authors would concede, their paper is not the final and definitive version of this aspect of the UAE's fauna - clearly much more remains to be discovered.

We shall continue to report on those discoveries as they occur and welcome any future submissions, no matter how large or small.

### Corporate Members of the ENHG

Production of *Tribulus*, and many of the other activities of the Emirates Natural History Group, including the grant programme of the Group's Conservation Fund, would not be possible without the generous support of the Group's Corporate Members, many of whom have provided consistent assistance over many years. The Editorial Board and the Group Committee acknowledge, with thanks, the invaluable support of the following companies and bodies, currently Corporate members of the Group, and all past Corporate sponsors:

Abu Dhabi Company for Onshore Oil Operation, ADCO; Al Fahim Group; Al Nasser Holdings; BP; Environment Agency - Abu Dhabi, EAD; Kanoo Group; Al Masaood; Intercontinental Hotels; Jashanmal National Company; METCO; Motivate Publishing; Nama Development; National Bank of Abu Dhabi; Omeir Travel Agency; Richards Butler Reed Smith; Rotana Beach Hotel; URS Dames and Moore.