

Introduction

The United Arab Emirates (UAE), a constitutional federation of seven emirates (Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Sharjah, Ajman, Umm al-Quwain, Ras al-Khaimah and Fujairah), is located in the southeastern Arabian Peninsula on the Arabian (Persian) Gulf, bordering Oman and the Gulf of Oman to the east, Oman's portion of the Musandam Peninsula to the north, the Arabian Gulf to the west and northwest, and Saudi Arabia to the south. There is both a federal government and seven emirate governments whose jurisdictions and activities are defined in the constitution.

The UAE's approximately 1,300 km coastline, which includes a large number of offshore islands, has a variety of sensitive ecosystems: coral reefs, salt marshes, 'khors' (tidal inlets), mangroves, natural lagoons and creeks and seagrass beds, which provide breeding, nesting, and feeding resources for wildlife. Along the Musandam and Qatar Peninsulas are steep cliffs.

Many of the offshore islands host bird, marine mammal and sea turtle populations. For example, Abu Al Abvad is utilized by breeding plovers plus more than 6000 migrating wading birds, and provides dolphin, dugong and sea turtle foraging areas. Al Ushsh Island, Algurm Wa Lefeyah, Dinyah Island, and Qarnain Island also provide habitat for marine wildlife.

The RAMSAR site Marawah Marine Biosphere Reserve (which includes Bu Tinah) has a wide variety of habitats which provide shelter and feeding grounds for dugong (V), is an important nesting site for hawksbill turtles (CR) and feeding/ resting site for migratory birds. The UN recognizes the Bu Tinah Archipelago as one of the most important sanctuaries for turtles in the Indian Ocean area.

Jabal Ali Wetland Sanctuary/Jabal Ali Marine Sanctuary, another RAMSAR site with diverse habitat hosts hawksbill (CR) and green (E) turtles, dugong (V) and Indo-Pacific humpback dolphin (V) among other marine animals.

In addition to the risk of oil spills from the UAE's large bunkering facilities and offshore oil fields, which are primarily in Abu Dhabi waters, surface currents in the eastern Arabian Gulf move counterclockwise bringing oil spilled in the waters of the lower Gulf to the UAE coast. And squalls and waterspouts, created by 150 km winds, are common in the autumn.

The islands of Greater and Lesser Tunb and Abu Musa, in the Arabian Gulf, are the subject of a long-term dispute between Iran and the UAE.

At Risk Wildlife

In this section, some individual wildlife species are mentioned followed by a letter in parentheses. These are species included in the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species within the top three categories of risk - Vulnerable to extinction (V), Endangered (E) or Critically Endangered (CR).

Avian species – large numbers of resident and migrating ducks and geese and migrating shorebirds and waders are found in the country, particularly on the offshore islands such as Abu L Sayaif, which hosts wintering waterbirds, Al Zorah Khor Ajman where Socotra cormorant (V) and large numbers of migrating waterbirds are found, and Siniyah Island which hosts the largest colony of Socotra cormorant in the world.

Marine mammals – the waters around the islands of Murawah and Bu Tini are home to the world's second largest population of dugongs (V). Twenty-one species of cetacean are found in the UAE's offshore waters with most whales being sighted from April to May and September to November and most dolphins from February to May and September to November in the Gulf of Oman. Cetacean species of special concern include the sperm whale (V), Indian Ocean humpback dolphin (E) Indo-Pacific humpback dolphin (V) and Indo-Pacific finless porpoise (V).

Marine reptiles – Green (E) turtles nest on UAE beaches while loggerhead (V), leatherback (V) and, possibly olive ridley (V) turtles forage in the southeast Arabian Gulf. Hawksbills (CR) nest on offshore islands and forage in coral reefs along the coast, in particular, Sir Bo Na'air Island is one of the key nesting sites for hawksbill turtles and one of the most important marine protected areas in the United Arab Emirates and the Arabian Gulf region.

Regional Seas

Arabian (Persian) Gulf
Gulf of Oman

Past experience

The UAE responded to spills arising from the Iran/Iraq war (1980-88), although its coastline was not seriously affected. Oil slicks also threatened the coastal and marine habitats all along the Arabian coastline during the Iraq/Kuwait war (1991) and the country was affected in the conflict's aftermath. The death of two million seabirds was reported (source: Fisheries Department of the Ministry of Environment and Water).

The Emirates have experienced some other major spills including the bunker barge AKARI (1987) which spilled 1000 tonnes of fuel oil after being beached at Jebeli Ali, the barge PONTOON 300 (1998) which lost intermediate fuel oil (IFO) after becoming swamped by heavy seas from the north and later on sank off the coast of Ajman and the SEKI (1994), which spilt 16,000 tonnes of crude after a collision off Fujairah causing disruption in local fisheries. The spill washed up onto the shores of the six islands nestled in the Emirate's complex estuary system, home and breeding ground for flamingos, herons, gulls and assorted migratory birds as well as a feeding area for fish. Mangroves were reported to be polluted.

The AL JAZYA 1 sank off the coast of Abu Dhabi (2000) releasing 400 tonnes of heavy fuel oil and the ZAYNAB tanker sunk off Jebel Ali, Dubai spilt 600 tonnes of heavy fuel oil (2001).

The UAE continues to experience minor incidents on a regular basis, including at least four incidents in 2020, however no further major spills have occurred.

Response: the role of the authorities

Under the National Contingency Plan, in force since 2002, the Ministry of Climate Change and Environment has oversight of spill response throughout the UAE, however the Ruler of each Emirate assumes command of spills occurring solely within their Emirate.

In Sharjah the Environment and Protected Areas Authority would be involved in any response as would the Environment Protection and Development Authority in Ras Al Khaimah. In Abu Dhabi the Environment Agency (EAD) would be involved.

Several oil companies and port authorities also have contingency plans for oil spill response.

Oiled wildlife response

Formal guidelines?

There are no formal guidelines for oiled wildlife response in the UAE, however, Abu Dhabi's a National Emergency Crisis and Disasters Management Authority (NCEMA), which develops national plans for emergency response; sets the standards, for and coordinates all actions during, an oil spill response.

In Abu Dhabi, EAD is responsible for wildlife rescue and rehabilitation and would work with the Abu Dhabi National Oil Company (ADNOC) and NCEMA as well as its own technical team in rescuing seabirds, dugongs and turtles. These entities would be likely to assist in other Emirates if requested.

Response objectives and strategy

Response objectives and strategy are not clearly defined at this time.

Euthanasia or rehabilitation?

Rehabilitation would be permitted, however, there are limited resources and experienced personnel in the country, particularly for avian response.

Impact assessment

EAD would be involved in initial assessment and response in Abu Dhabi.

The National Avian Research Center and the Abu Dhabi Falcon Hospital, while primarily focused on terrestrial species, may be involved in avian impact assessment.

The Central Veterinary Research Laboratory would likely handle any post-mortem examinations and laboratory testing.

Notification and early response

There is no system for notification and early response to oil affected wildlife for the UAE.

Wildlife responders

As noted above the EAD and the NCEMA technical team technical team would be active in rescue work. The Dubai Turtle Rehabilitation Project at Jumeirah would be heavily involved in any response to marine turtles during a spill. They may be able to assist with marine mammal response as well.

WWF-UAE is active in conservation of marine turtles and the Arabian Sea subspecies of humpback whale, thus may be able to assist with these species as needed.

The Emirates Environmental Group works largely on land-based community activities such as recycling but may be able to support a response.

The Emirates Diving Association may be able to assist in any on-water activities.

Cooperation between stakeholders

The Dubai Turtle Rehabilitation Project at Jumeirah works closely with the Dubai Wildlife Protection Office, the Dubai Falcon Clinic and the Central Veterinary Research Laboratory.

Permanent facilities

The only sea turtle rehabilitation centre in the UAE is at the Dubai Turtle Rehabilitation Project at Jumeirah. This group has also done some marine mammal rehabilitation.

Although there are a number of avian centres in the UAE, most work with birds of prey and endangered species such as the Hubara bustard. They may be able to provide veterinary support but have no experience with marine species.

Current processes

A project to develop an oiled wildlife response plan and increase capacity in the UAE was initiated in 2020.

Documentation and references

General references

IOPF Country Profile

Birdlife International Country Profile

Sea Turtles in the Middle East. SWOT Report Vol.2.2007

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*Country Wildlife Response Profiles
A Summary of oiled wildlife response
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