Plans are being presented for the setting up of a dolphinarium in Gibraltar. This is one of a series of proposals by a newly formed company by the name of Europa Point Marine Village Limited, which include a marine aquarium, dolphin rescue area and a museum. The dolphinarium, which would be at Rosia Bay, would hold 18 performing Bottle-nose dolphins and 9 sea lions. Apart from performances by the captive animals, the developers also propose to include swimming with dolphins in their activities. They claim that they will build seating capacity for 3000 spectators and that they will employ over 300 people.

The Gibraltar Ornithological & Natural History Society, with the support of major international organisations including the Whale and Dolphin Conservation Society and the Animal Welfare Institute, is opposed specifically to the dolphinarium and the use of captive dolphins and sea lions.

Dolphinaria are a thing of the past, much as the use of circus animals is quickly receding into history. It is a well documented fact that dolphins live less in captivity, and there are serious reservations to their being made to perform in front of crowds for commercial purposes.

EPMV, which claim to be backed by Ocean Embassy, a firm that is connected with dolphinaria in other parts of the world, claim that captive dolphins are better off than wild ones, as they are protected from predators and disease. They also claim that dolphinaria can be conservation tools. GONHS rejects these statements. The keeping of bottle-nosed dolphins in captivity is of little if any conservation value. Even breeding in captivity is of limited value, other than helping to perpetuate the practice of keeping them, as they are not part of a re-population or release project. The notion that captivity is better than freedom is as bizarre as suggesting that people will be happier in prison.

A major concern of GONHS is the way that a dolphinarium in Gibraltar would add to the demand for captive dolphins - by at least 18. Dolphins are often captured from the wild, as in Japan, with incredible cruelty, as seen in the film The Cove. The Gibraltar Government, which has not taken a decision yet on the project, has stated that it will not allow wild-caught dolphins, and EPMV says that all the dolphins coming to Gibraltar are already in captivity. They have not stated that they will not have been caught in the past. In any case, even if all the Gibraltar-bound dolphins were born in captivity, the fact that they will come here will clearly increase a demand that could well be met by further captures.

There is no need for a rehabilitation centre in Gibraltar where strandings are extremely rare (less than one every 20 years) and where protocols to access professional centres already exist. As for the therapeutic value of swimming with dolphins, this is not proven and can in fact be dangerous.

The use of Rosia Bay would have implications on the marine habitat of the area, which is protected and would be prone to pollution and possible escapes of dolphins from populations well distant from the local wild one.

A dolphinarium in Gibraltar would be an embarrassment in the eyes of the international community where Gibraltar is trying so hard to be respected as an entity in itself.
Editorial

HOW CAN WE CAPTURE THEIR IMAGINATION?

The incredible success of the GONHS Facebook campaign against the proposed Dolphinarium, with over 4000 members on going to press - most of them from Gibraltar - has reassured us that we have the finger on the pulse of public environmental opinion. Our incessant - often successful - work, both in public and behind the scenes, in promoting nature conservation, environmental protection and improvements, in turn demonstrates our enthusiasm and the fact that there remains so much to do. But we fail still to capture the imagination of the politicians. Biodiversity-friendly initiatives by the Government - welcome, if infrequent - are rarely inspiring. It is true that GONHS is still consulted on some initiatives, but most of the larger projects and initiatives - like works on the isthmus, or the exclusion of GONHS from close involvement in developing new fishing regulations - seem to disregard the real possibilities and the even more real desire to cooperate that exists within GONHS. Indeed, pro-nature statements by all three political parties - again so welcome when they occur, whether we agree with them or not - are few and far between.

What do we need to do to capture their attention, or indeed their imagination? Are we approaching the end of the days when our quiet work behind the scenes achieved the desired results and avoided unpleasantness in public? Do we need to increase the public side of our activities and increase the strength of our language in our public statements? Possibly.

Who will be the winners and the losers if the depth and width of expertise that GONHS offers Gibraltar isn't made the most of while it is still on offer?

John Cortes

INTERNATIONAL YEAR OF BIODIVERSITY EVENTS

A number of special events were held in May to mark the International Year of Biodiversity.

A Photographic Exhibition was held from Monday 17th to Friday 21st May at the John Mackintosh Hall. A selection of photographs of Gibraltar’s Biodiversity by various photographers was displayed as well as photographs of dangers and threats our biodiversity faces.

On Thursday 20th May there was a talk on Biodiversity in Gibraltar, also at the John Mackintosh Hall. The talk, presented by John Cortes, Leslie Linares and Keith Bensusan, summarized the richness of and threats to Gibraltar’s biodiversity, but concentrated on reports of new additions to the list of Gibraltar’s fauna and flora, and new discoveries, in plants and in particular invertebrates. This was followed by a viewing of the Exhibition and a re-launch of the Biodiversity Action Plan (Perez 2006) and the book that included the exhibition photographs Gibraltar, Nature’s Mountain.

The following Saturday 22nd May, World Biodiversity Day, saw a number of events at the Botanic Gardens, including bird ringing and bird watching, a bird of prey display, a tour of the Botanic Gardens and an open day at the Alameda Wildlife Park.
THE ISTHMUS
An opportunity lost

While the size and cost of the new air terminal building is the subject of considerable division in opinion in Gibraltar, most will agree that the related project of constructing a tunnel under the airfield and improving the roads and appearance of Eastern Beach - despite the present inconvenience of the works - is to be welcomed. But this project represents a tragic lost opportunity for well co-ordinated development with benefits to nature conservation.

The former Ministry of Defence Aerial Farm, divided into two by Devil’s Tower Road, was until about 24 months ago, an area rich in plant and invertebrate biodiversity and of considerable natural beauty. It served as a habitat for Fan-tailed Warblers, provided feeding opportunities for Common Kestrels and Little Owls, and, even more important, had great potential for habitat restoration. Part of the story was covered on page 7 of Gibraltar Nature News 17.

While it was clear that part of this would be lost, discussions were proceeding and reassurances received on retaining the southern section and improving the habitat by using the area as a destination for relocation and the possibility of providing seasonal water and re-creating some of the lost habitat for reptiles and amphibians, once extremely varied and common on the isthmus.

Careful planning, with the involvement of GONHS, could have ensured that sections of the habitat were left intact as works proceeded, in order to allow a reservoir of seeds and invertebrates. Areas would have been left fallow at the end of the project, to show future users part of what the habitat looked like, and the area now under a rubble dump could have become a small protected area with enhanced wildlife.

Instead, a temporary car park for vehicles in transit has taken up part of the land, while the rest of the site has become a continuous building site, all contributing to a total lack of wildlife value.

No amount of artificial landscaping in the future can restore what has been lost. Only real investment in removing rubble and active habitat creation would allow us to recapture a glimmer of an area that was once of great ecological interest.

At a time when the best advice is available to project leaders and when both GONHS and the Environment Ministry have professional teams available to carry these ideas through, the fact that it is painful to look down over the mess that is the isthmus is even more regrettable.

When the road is finished and the air terminal is completed, it could well look tidy and smart, and even have landscaped greenery. But that is not the point.

ANTS IN CEUTA
Free-flying South American Blue-crowned Conures have been present in Gibraltar since early 2002. Nesting has been very strongly suggested in the past through the occasional appearance of additional birds in juvenile plumage. It is only in the last few months, however, that their nesting site has been located.

This was communicated to GONHS first by neighbours, and then by construction workers demolishing the site of the old Theatre Royal in the centre of Gibraltar Town.

This building has long been derelict, and the site undisturbed, and the Conures, which are hole-nesters were using holes in the walls as nest sites, possibly in the absence of mature trees with suitable cavities. In fact, the last site to be used held up the works for a short period in June as construction workers zealously guarded the nest until the three young fledged.

Although not native, most people have welcomed the addition of the species, which frequents gardens and, as there is no agriculture in Gibraltar, is not a pest.

The Conures will now need to find alternative nest holes if they are to continue to nest in Gibraltar.

LESSER KESTREL ATTEMPT
The GONHS Caves and Cliffs Section and its Raptor Rehabilitation Unit are linking up in a project aimed at increasing the productivity of the Gibraltar Lesser Kestrel colony. Surveys carried out annually by GONHS have shown that each nest produces fewer young than would be possible given optimum conditions. The project, under licence, aims to remove half the eggs or young chicks (which would most likely die in the nest due to lack of sufficient food) and rear them in captivity for future release, leaving the remainder in the care of the parents.

GONHS GULL UNIT IN CADIZ

The GONHS Gull Cull Unit paid an informal visit to their counterparts in Cadiz this spring, following a similar visit from the Spanish unit to Gibraltar earlier in the year. The Cadiz Gull Cull unit was set up several years ago following advice from GONHS, which has great experience in the control of Yellow-legged Gulls.

The visit included travelling to the main Yellow-legged Gull nesting areas in and around Cadiz, as well as to areas where they congregate to feed.

The visits allowed both teams to observe each other’s work, and were of great mutual benefit in improving their effectiveness.

Regional co-operation in gull control is essential as we are dealing with one large population. While by far the largest nesting area in Gibraltar, Gibraltar gulls forage regularly in the same areas as those nesting in Cadiz, be it at sea or in rubbish dumps or indeed urban areas.

As part of the activities on the day, the Gibraltar team visited the centre near Barbate where the Bald Ibis re-introduction programme is based.

GONHS invertebrates section visited Ceuta recently, as part of a team that is cataloguing the ant fauna of the territory. The team consists of Joaquin Reyes and Soledad Carpiñeto of the Universidad de Córdoba, Maria Dolores Martinez of the Universidad Complutense de Madrid and the two members from Gibraltar. The project is funded by Obirmasa (Obras y Medioambiente de Ceuta), which offers small grants for biodiversity studies in Ceuta. Ceuta is a much larger territory than Gibraltar, with a far more extensive countryside. The study will no doubt yield interesting results, as well as highlight problems with regard to the presence of invasive species.

BOOK DONATION
Joaquin Bensusan, former curator of the Gibraltar Museum, and an honorary member of the Society, has donated a great number of books and videos to the Society’s library. The books are mainly reference and identification manuals on marine wildlife, a passion that Joaquin embraced at a late stage, when he produced the magnificent displays that were once on show at the Museum. He used these books to great effect in identifying a great number of species of fish that were caught in offshore waters by the fishing clubs and especially the Gibraltar Federation of Sea Anglers, where he catalogued a large number of species. We are very grateful to Joaquin for this donation that will further our efforts in cataloguing all marine life under the Gibraltar Biodiversity Project.

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INGLIS WAY FOOTPATH

Inglis Way is probably the least known of the footpaths on the Rock. This is due to the fact that for a number of years it had become so overgrown that it was impassable throughout much of its length. In 2006 it was cleared by the Upper Rock Team working under instruction from GONHS, and since then the same Team has been responsible for its maintenance.

The path is 1130m in length. Its southern entrance by the New Queen’s Gate of Charles V Wall lies at 232m above sea level, and is marked by an interpretation panel. From here it climbs steadily to a height of 280m, in a straight line, for 250m. Just before exiting at Charles V Road, it starts to descend for 400m until it reaches an area of lower vegetation that used to be a firebreak surrounding Bruce’s Farm. At this point the path veers to the right and starts to climb, following the curve of the old boundary wall of Bruce’s Farm, levelling off and then descending until it exits at Queen’s Road, a further 480m.

The vegetation along the path is rich and varied, for although much of it runs through maquis, there are sections where the path is open and quite stony, and others where it is fairly open and bordered by rocky outcrops. Such variation in habitat gives rise to a corresponding diversity of species.

The southern stretch from New Queen’s Gate to

Charles V Road is quite stony and yet contains interesting species such as the fragrant clematis Clematis flammula; the sweet-scented oxeye Asteriscus aquaticus; the large Mediterranean spurge Euphorbia characias; and even a small stand of the brown bee orchid Ophrys fusca. All four of these species are quite rare on the Upper Rock. Attractive shrubs such as the scorpion vetch Coronilla valentina subsp glauca; the shrubby germander Teucrium fruticans; and the aromatic felty germander Teucrium lusitanicum, line the sides of the path.

The next stretch from Charles V Road down to Bruce’s Farm firebreak provides an excellent display of the species that make up the maquis. First of all there are the trees and shrubs such as the wild olive Olea europaea; the osyris Osyris quadripartieta; the Mediterranean buckthorn Rhamnus alaternus; and the lentisca Pistacia lentiscus. Then there are climbing plants such as black bryony Tamus communis; prickly ivy Smilax aspera; and honeysuckle Lonicera implexa. Other typical path-side species found here, among many others, are the three-cornered leek Allium triquetrum; the tall and spiny yellow tree thistle Carthamus arborescens; the introduced and prolific freesia Freesia refracta; the wild yellow jasmine Jasminum fruticans; the Jersey buttercup Ranunculus paludosus; and the strongly and unpleasantly aromatic fringed rue Ruta angustifolia.

One species that had not been seen for some fifteen years, and which only grew along this path, is the rampion Campanula rapunculus. Thanks to the clearing and careful maintenance of the path, this year has seen a remarkable return of this species. Some forty plants were recorded. The shadier and more humid sections of the path provide excellent conditions for the growth of liverworts, mosses and lichens, and various species of these non-flowering plants can be found all along the paths.

The last stretch of the path skirts around the old,
crumbling wall of Bruce’s Farm. This section of the path used to run through a large firebreak which provided the perfect habitat for a large number of species, some of which were not found elsewhere on the Rock. During the 1990s the decision was taken not to clear and maintain this firebreak any more, thus compromising the survival of such species. These include the St John’s wort Hypericum perforatum; the fleabane Pulicaria odora; the hairy restharrow Ononis pubescens; the winged spurge Euphorbia ptero-cocca; the clustered clover Trifolium glomeratum; the yellow bartsia Parentucellia viscosa; the Mediterranean linseed Bellardia trixago; the ground pine Ajuga iva; the greater catmint Nepeta tuberosa; and the yellow bee orchid Ophrys lutea. Some of these species have not been seen along the path for some time, and may have become locally extinct. However, thanks again to the careful maintenance of the path, the greater catmint is spreading, and this year, there have been two other remarkable reappearances, this time of the St John’s wort after about fifteen years’ absence, and the clustered clover which has now spread throughout much of the path.

The final descent to Queen’s Road at Bruce’s Farm is relatively steep and quite uneven underfoot, and care must be taken over the slippery stones. Here the path is lined by large quantities of bear’s breech Acanthus mollis; alexanders Smyrnium olusatrum; and intermediate periwinkle Vinca difformis, while the stones of the boundary wall are covered with moss.

As is the case with other footpaths within the Nature Reserve, walking along Inglis Way is a relaxing and educational way of appreciating our natural environment without the experience being spoilt and frustrated by the traffic that plagues the Upper Rock roads.
A new species of ant to science has been discovered from Gibraltar. The ant Tetramorium parvioculum was discovered by Rhian Guillem and Keith Bensusan of GONHS’ Invertebrate Section. The ant was initially found back in 2008 in 'The Mount' – old colonial grounds established in 1779 hosting a collection of exotic plants, but now in a semi-wild state. The gardens back onto a small patch of native woodland and it is there that this species was found.

T. parvioculum is also present in the Upper Rock Nature Reserve.

Both the worker and queen have been described. The species is small; workers are no more than 2.5 mm in length and are a brick red colour. The best features with which to distinguish this species from other Tetramorium in the region are its small eyes ('parvioculum' means small eye), and distinctive sculpturing, which is not found in other Western Palaearctic Tetramorium species. The species appears to have partially endogenous habits and is rarely seen above ground.

Tetramorium parvioculum belongs to the simillimum-group of Tetramorium ants, which is of Afrotropical origin. There are other species of ants that are endemic to the Strait of Gibraltar that belong to genera which have otherwise tropical distributions, such as Anochetus ghilianii and Technomyrmex vexatus. It is possible that T. parvioculum may constitute another species with such a distribution.

Tetramorium parvioculum was published as a species new to science in the journal of the Aragonese Entomological Society, the 'Boletín Sociedad Entomológica Aragonesa', which in recent years has become the most prestigious journal for taxonomic papers on entomology in Iberia. The full citation of the article is:


Two GONHS members, Rhian Guillem and Leslie Linares have been photographing herbarium collections housed at the Gibraltar Museum. The work forms part of a joint collaborative project between the Gibraltar Botanic Gardens and the Gibraltar Museum. Work involved photographing specimens and inputting the photos together with information on each specimen into a digital, computer-based database. Two herbaria are to be digitised in this manner – the Linares-Harper Herbarium (about 25 years old) and the Wolley-Dod Herbarium (nearly 100 years old).

The Linares-Harper Herbarium is a collection of plants from Gibraltar collected by resident botanists Leslie Linares and Arthur Harper, also authors, together with John Cortes, of the 'Flowers of Gibraltar' book published by Wildlife Gibraltar Ltd. The herbarium contains some 700 specimens, including Gibraltar endemics such as Gibraltar Chickweed Cerastium gibraltaricum, Gibraltar Restharrow Ononis matrix subsp. ramosissima and Gibraltar Saxifrage Saxifraga globulifera var. gibraltarica. There are also a number of specimens collected and identified by Spanish botanist Benito Valdés, S. Talavera and former curator of the Gibraltar Museum and honorary member of GONHS Joaquin Bensusan.

The Wolley-Dod Herbarium was collected and prepared by Anthony Hurt Wolley-Dod (1861-1948) in 1913-1914. He was a British soldier and during the First World War he was remobilised and served as a Lieutenant Colonel. In addition to collecting from Gibraltar and Spain, he also collected plants from Great Britain, South Africa, and California. The Wolley-Dod Herbarium is a collection of plants from Gibraltar and Spain, and houses the type specimen of Asphodelus serotinus. The herbarium was presented to the Gibraltar Museum by Wolley-Dod in 1914, who published 'A flora of Gibraltar and its neighbourhood' in the 'Journal of Botany' in the same year, based on his collections. The database contains some 2000 specimens and is still in the process of completion. Despite this herbarium being nearly 100 years old, the majority of specimens were in exceptionally good condition and well mounted. Some have even kept their colour.

Digitising these herbaria will allow people to readily access the collections with all the information and relevant specimen photos at the touch of a button. It will also help to prevent the fragile collections from being damaged, thus preserving them for longer.
THE PROBLEM OF GOATS ON THE UPPER ROCK NATURE RESERVE

Section 5 (1) (h) of the Nature Protection Act, 1991, under ‘Protection of wild life’, states:

“No person shall, without the prior written consent of the Authority, in the Reserve, introduce any animal or plant which is of a kind which is not ordinarily resident or is not a regular visitor to Gibraltar in a wild state or does not grow in the wild in Gibraltar, as the case may be.”

For many years now, two mobs of goats (yes, a group of goats is a mob) have been roaming the Reserve. One mob is found in the area above Governor’s Lookout, along Green’s Lodge Road and below Rock Gun, whilst the other is in the area of Royal Anglian Way. The questions of who brought them into Gibraltar, and how, and when they were released into the Upper Rock remain unanswered. Recently there have been attempts at removing the animals, and the northern flock appears to have been eliminated. At the time of writing, about half a dozen of the mob at Royal Anglian Way are still there. There is now a third small mob roaming the area of the chicken runs above Calpe Road; and this one even includes some sheep! Surely something can be done about these before they spread to the area above Sacred Heart Terrace; an area rich in flora and fauna.

Goats are voracious grazers and browsers. They eat everything in their path. Their effect within the areas of the Nature Reserve where they roam is all too evident. Ground cover vegetation is either totally eliminated, leaving bare soil, or else an impoverished community of unplantable plants are left to spread. All this has the effect of increasing soil erosion when it rains, leading to the possibility of rock falls. At the same time, many trees and shrubs are being killed as the goats strip off their bark. As the food supply dwindles, the goats will increase their range, causing more damage as they go.

The effect of these goats on Gibraltar’s biodiversity can be significant, and in this the International Year of Biodiversity, it would be quite appropriate to remove this problem to the relief of Gibraltar’s rich plant and animal diversity.

THE UPPER ROCK TEAM HARD AT WORK

Early this year, the Upper Rock Team got a much-needed and welcome boost in their number with the addition of three more members: Jonathan Hammerton, Arthur Asquez and Christian Ressa. This not only increases the scope of the type of work the team can do, but also eases the burden on the original members.

This year, apart from the on-going maintenance and clearing of all footpaths in the Nature Reserve, the team has been hard at work at a number of different projects. They have been:

• Removing the invasive introduced species African cornflag Chasmacthe floribunda from the firebreak just north of St Michael’s Cave. Part of this work had been started in 2009, but these plants are not easy to remove as they grow from corms, and the area needs re-visiting for a few years before those plants which have been overlooked are eliminated.

• Removing other invasive introduced species such as Century plant Agave americana from several places within the Nature Reserve.

• Repairing damage to fittings along the footpaths such as Mediterranean Steps, and vandalised interpretation boards.

• Habitat management in the Jews’ Gate Area.

The team, under the capable hands of Reuben Senior and Al Marble, do an invaluable job in maintaining the biodiversity of the Nature Reserve in the work that they do (see the article on Inglis Way on p4). This they do with care and attention to the existing flora, and hence fauna and we are much indebted to them.
Status and importance
Cyprus is one of the biodiversity hotspots on Earth, but, like most other island and coastal areas in the Mediterranean region, its fragile ecosystems are threatened by tourism pressure and development. The Sovereign Base Areas SBA's of Cyprus of Akrotiri-Episkopi and Dhekelia, despite being situated on the coastline, have retained extensive areas in semi-natural condition, due to the restrictions on non-military development. Training and retained sites outside the Bases, such as Troodos and Akamas have a similar conservation value. All these have been designated or are candidate Special Protection Areas (SPAs) and Special Areas of Conservation (SACs), whereas Akrotiri wetlands have been designated as a Ramsar Wetland of International Importance.

Habitats and Flora
The SBAs cover just 3% of the area of Cyprus but host an impressive share of its biodiversity, including 31 terrestrial Annex I habitat types, 6 of which are priority ones. The diversity of habitats includes saline pools, freshwater marsh, phrygana, garigue, maquis, pine forests and many others. These habitats support more than 1200 plant species, more than 45 of which are endangered with extinction, according to the Red Data Book of the Flora of Cyprus. It is worth mentioning that the distribution of 17 of these endangered plants is confined within the SBAs: Baldellia ranunculoides, Centropodia forskalii, Cistanche phylypaea, Cladium mariscus, Convolvulus lineatus, Coronilla repanda subsp. repanda, Ipomoea sagittata, Isoplepis cernua, Linum maritimum, Lotus cytisoides, Merintha aquatica, Onosma orientalis, Orchis palustris, Salvia dominica, Scirpus lacustris subsp. tabernaemontani, Serapias parviflora and Euphorbia pubescens.

Fauna
Avifauna is the most prominent faunal feature within the SBAs, with about 290 bird species recorded at Akrotiri Peninsula alone, whereas almost all the bird species of the island have been recorded within the wider SBAs and Troodos Camp. These include more than 90 migratory water bird species, thousands of overwintering Flamingos Phoenicopterus roseus, hundreds of roosting Demonselle Cranes Grus virgo and Common Cranes Grus grus, 20 staging species of sandpipers, dozens of nesting pairs of Kentish Plovers Charadrius alexandrinus, and large numbers of migratory Bee-eaters Merops apiaster. Fassouri marsh regularly hosts nesting Spur-winged Plovers Vanellus spinosus and in 2005 it became a nesting site (the only one in Cyprus) for the globally endangered Ferruginous Duck Ayya nyroca, which during the last 2 seasons has been nesting at Zakaki pool. Akrotiri is an important site for migratory raptors as well, with 25 species recorded passing through the area, including hundreds of Red-footed Falcons Falco vespertinus and thousands of Honey Buzzards Pernis apivorus as well as many Eagle species. The cliffs of Akrotiri and Episkopi are important breeding sites for the migrant breeder Eleonora’s Falcon Falco eleonora, as well as the resident breeder Griffon Vulture Gyps fulvus.

Mammals within the SBAs and Troodos Camp include seven confirmed bat species so far, the most notable being the maternity roosts in coastal caves at Episkopi, Akrotiri and Cape Pyla of the Egyptian Fruit Bat Rousettus aegyptiacus and a maternity roost within a building at Troodos Camp of the Plecotus kolombatovici. Akrotiri marine caves are home to another significant mammal, the Mediterranean Monk Seal Monachus monachus, which is a priority species of Annex II of the Habitats Directive.

The rest of the mammals within the SBAs are common in the rest of Cyprus (Fox, Hare, Hedgehog, Rodents, Dolphins), but there are occasional surprises such as a recent record at Akrotiri of a group of 20 Rough-toothed dolphins Steno bredanensis, which stranded - and were eventually rescued - at Lady’s Mile Beach.

The reptile and amphibian interest within the SBAs includes the nesting beaches of Loggerhead and Green turtles, which are both
priority species of Annex II of the Habitats Directive, the significant coastal habitats of Schreiber’s Fringe-toed Lizard Acanthodactylus schreiberi and the important populations of Saviýny’s Treefrog Hyla savignyi, which are an important part of the food chain at Fassouri Marsh. As far as fish are concerned, it is worth mentioning the South European toothcarp Aphanius fasciatus, which occurs within the brackish part of Akrotiri wetlands.

The invertebrate interest within the SBAs includes a rich representation of the island’s diversity. A significant proportion of the Cyprus insects occur within the SBAs. For example, out of the total of 52 butterfly species identified in Cyprus, 46 occur within the SBAs and Troodos, including the endemic Glacocypha paphos and Maniola cypricola. Also, out of the 54 Odonata, the 86 Buprestidae, and the 242 Carabidae species, 25, 33 and 102 species accordingly, occur at Akrotiri Peninsula alone, where the total number of insects has been estimated at more than 2,000 species. This includes many endemic species as well as insects with distribution limited to Akrotiri, such as for example the impressive Chlaenius dimidiatum found only at Fassouri Marsh and the endemic Xantomus cyprus subsp. cyprus at Lady’s Mile.

Challenges and future management

The environment of the SBA Areas is under mounting risks from both natural and anthropogenic factors. The biggest natural pressure comes from climate change and the continuous reduction in rainfall levels on the island. Coastal erosion due to a combination of different factors - river damming, quarrying of sedimentary materials, tectonic movements and mean sea level rise - is another threat for Akrotiri Peninsula. Seral succession is a significant biological factor, which is for example changing the herb and rush meadow at Fassouri Marsh into reedbed. The tools under consideration to deal with this are water level management, controlled fire, targeted harvesting and grazing. The anthropogenic pressure includes aspirations for all kinds of development, both military and civilian, including dwelling houses, golf courses and other large scale leisure development, warehouses, industrial facilities, renewable energy plants, roads etc. These cause potential direct damage such as habitat loss and fragmentation as well as indirect impact. The management of these pressures is underpinned by environmental legislation such as the Environmental Impact Assessment, the Protection and Management of Nature and Wildlife and the Game and Wild Birds Ordinances. Unmanaged access, fly-tipping, poaching and fishing are also detrimental human activities. Challenges and solutions are the shooting of 52 Red-footed Falcons at Fassouri plantations in October 2007 and the more than 50 marine turtles, the majority of which apparently killed as fishing by-catch, which washed up on the SBA beaches at Akrotiri-Episkopi Bay this year. The introduction in the last century of alien invasive species, especially Acacia saligna, is having a continuous adverse impact on biodiversity. The control of these species is one of the priority management actions underway.

The SBA Authorities in cooperation with the Republic of Cyprus, NGOs, independent experts and other stakeholders engage in baseline studies and research to support biodiversity conservation. Considerable investment has also been made in the direction of environmental education through the establishment and operation of the Akrotiri Environmental Education and Information Centre. The Centre participates in a pan-island environmental network run by the Ministry of Education and Culture of the Republic of Cyprus, which offers environmental programmes to schools as part of their education curriculum. The Centre is also promoting other areas of environmental opportunity such as ecotourism and European exchange programmes.

The biodiversity within the SBAs is a significant part of the natural wealth of Cyprus and the whole of Europe, and we all have a legal and ethical responsibility to ensure its preservation for enjoyment by both current and future generations. This can only be achieved through the implementation of sustainable principles in agreed, holistic, long-term management approaches supported by wide stakeholder participation and commitment.
ROCK FALLS: A VERY NATURAL OCCURRENCE

The 2009/2010 winter was particularly wet and, largely as a result of this, there were four major rock falls in Gibraltar, substantially more than in most other years.

In limestone areas like Gibraltar, rock falls can be very natural occurrences. Towns that exist at the foot of cliffs have to live with an awareness of the threat of rock falls. A major fall occurred last winter above Sandy Bay. There is no denying that the fall was impressive, and was even captured on amateur video. The fall caused substantial damage. Two lines of rock catching fence were obliterated. The rocks ended up at street level narrowly missing a passing couple. The gap the rock left, which can be seen from street level, seems to be approximately 2 metres wide by about 5 metres tall. Looking at the pieces of rock that landed, it seems that the thickness was in the region of 50cm, making the rock that fell look more like a slab than a boulder. The height the rock fell from was about 350m and, as the cliff here is at a slight overhang, there was nothing to slow the rock down. The slab reached terminal velocity before it struck the rock catching fence. It is fairly safe to say that no fence in the world could have stopped it.

What caused the rock fall? There appears to have been soil behind the slab. Rainwater and soil must have accumulated there. The rain may have eroded the soil away, loosening the slab from the rock face. That, the reader will agree, is a very natural occurrence.

There is little that can be done to control such an event, which fortunately, while regular, is not frequent. Fences can mitigate a little and are probably very successful for smaller boulders. Bund lines, like those seen at Catalan Bay, are very effective but impossible to build at the sand slopes or behind the Rock Hotel. Finding all the potentially loose rocks would be impossible, and even if you could the end result would be a much reduced Rock of Gibraltar! Covering the cliff in a concrete screen would make the rock completely uninhabitable to flora and fauna, and make it aesthetically very unappealing, as happened at Little Bay. This would be horrific, but also financially impossible.

The fact is that we have to weigh the odds of wanting to live in a particular location with the threat of a rock fall. If one wishes to live next to the sea at beach level then one is exposed to having the sea come into your house during a storm. So it is clearly important that no new buildings should be placed near the base of any of our cliffs.

NOTE: There was also a major slippage of sandstone on the cliff above Catalan Bay. This had been predicted, and an area to contain the slippage had been prepared with a tall embankment protecting the roadway. The cause of this was different to that of the rock falls discussed above. This was an area that had been exposed by digging away of part of the great sand slopes, making the whole section of cliff artificial and unstable. There is an important lesson there too. While rock falls from the limestone cliffs may be hard to prevent, digging away at the great sand slopes - as proposed at various times in the past - can clearly be avoided, and should be.
THE STRAIT OF GIBRALTAR BIRD OBSERVATORY AT JEWS’ GATE

GONHS runs bird observatory is situated at Jews’ Gate, and overlooks Europa Point and the Straits of Gibraltar. It is an ideal location for observing spring migration of raptors, storks and diurnal passerines, swallows, pips etc. The observatory can sleep 6 visitors; these are usually a mixture of bird ringers and raptor watchers. Accommodation comprises of a single room (usually for the resident long-term ringer) a double room and one sleeping 4. Amenities include kitchen area with electric oven, microwave, toaster, kettle, washer and 2 fridge freezers. The bathroom has wash basin, shower and toilet. Bedding is provided along with towels.

Raptor migration commences in earnest around the end of February, and continues throughout the spring till early June. The weather is instrumental in providing the right conditions, with westerly winds blowing the birds towards the Gibraltar side of the straits, and easterly winds pushing raptors to the Spanish side. A wide variety of raptors can be encountered, with 33 species recorded so far, and soaring birds include White and Black Storks and Cranes. Species peak at different times. Black Kites and Short-toed Eagles arrive during the first half of March, with adult birds dominating the early part of the season. Booted Eagles and Sparrowhawks peak in early April, and Honey Buzzards are the latest of all with peaks in early May. Of the Vultures, Egyptian is the earliest during early March with Griffon slightly later. Other species seen regularly are Marsh, Montagu’s and Hen Harriers, Ospreys, Buzzards and Hobby. Scarce raptors can turn up and include Black and Ruppell’s Vultures, Bonelli’s Spotted and Lesser Spotted Eagles, Eleonora’s Falcon and Lanner, and Long-legged Buzzard.

A major function of the observatory is the trapping and ringing of migrant passerines during spring, autumn and winter. For people who enjoy or prefer a wide variety of species then spring is the time to visit. In 2010 46 species were ringed and included; Leach’s Petrel, Bee-eater, and age and sex. The wing length was measured, and the bird weighed on special digital scales. The bird was then released. In this case, it flew off on its way into Spain where it will breed before making its way back to Africa, via Gibraltar in the autumn.

Throughout March, April and May Steve and his assistants open the nets diligently each morning, just before first light as the roosting birds begin to move, recording the first arrivals of Song Thrush, Chiffchaff, warblers, Flycatchers, Nightjars & other tiny Scops Owls. The best weather conditions to bring in these small birds are when an easterly wind blows, and the heavy levanter cloud brings the migrants down into the Upper Rock vegetation. There is no rest on days of westerly winds, which bring migrating raptors across the Straits. Black Kites, Booted and Short toed Eagles, harriers, Honey Buzzards and Sparrowhawks to name a few are blown over the Rock in their thousands and each one is counted and recorded in the daily record log. These records are then forwarded to the SGBO and a summary of the most interesting observations are published on the GONHS website, under recent records, and in the Gibraltar Bird Report. This year Steve left on the 5th May to return to North Yorkshire, where he continues his ringing activities, providing more valuable data for the BTO. In the autumn our next resident ringer Roy Marsh will arrive, along with all the migrating birds making the return trip to Africa.
The end of 2009 saw a break from the drought conditions that again seemed to be afflicting Gibraltar. It was then that the jet stream moved south, and the end of December saw Atlantic depressions heading towards the Iberian Peninsula and indeed through the Strait of Gibraltar, dumping unprecedented rainfall, resulting in what was the wettest year on record. This coincided with heavy snowfalls and cold conditions in northern Europe and could have resulted in the first record, (subject to approval from the rarities committee) of an Eider, a drake that was seen heading south off the east side of the Rock on the 22nd January. Other than that the weather did not seem to influence many other species, and records during the period were few, as recorders took shelter from the elements.

Notwithstanding this, Cormorant records were again on the increase, as the species has now established a wintering presence in the area. On the 17th January, a flock of 250 birds that flew south over the airfield and landed off Western beach took everyone by surprise; not least the air traffic authorities who were worried at the risk this posed to aircraft and proceeded to scare the birds off with flares. Most took off and headed across the bay, but at least 90 birds were seen by another recorder heading south off the east side of the Rock. Throughout the late winter and spring, Cormorants were a regular feature off Europa Point and especially roosting and sheltering from easterly winds on the rocks at Little Bay. A maximum of fifteen birds were counted there in the company of several shags, and Cormorants continued to be sighted into early May.

On the 28th January, a Leach’s Petrel was picked up exhausted close to the harbour. It was in good condition and was ringed and released. Late January had seen some deep depressions heading into the Strait from the Atlantic, and reports from the Huelva coastline indicated several Fulmars and Leach’s Petrels had been found dead along the tide line. A further Leach’s Petrel was seen feeding off Europa Point on the 22nd February. With only five previous records, the species is rarely seen in the Straits area or the Mediterranean and is only encountered inshore after stormy weather.

March and April produced several records of interest, with some scarce migrants on the 7th March that included a Great Spotted Cuckoo, Southern Grey Shrike and Stone Curlew, amongst early arrivals of Black-eared and Common Wheatears, Woodchat Shrikes and Spectacled Warblers all observed on Windmill Hill. A flock of twelve Cranes was observed the following day over Jews’ Gate Observatory with many other raptors also crossing the Strait. Scarce raptors during the period included three single Merlins on the 10th, 20th and 30th March, and the third and fourth records of Spotted and Lesser Spotted Eagles (pending a Rarities Panel decision). Both these birds were seen on the 1st April within half an hour of each other. Flamingos were frequently recorded during the period, with six flocks for a total of 182, including two flocks taking a shortcut across the airfield. A Lesser Crested Tern heading into the Mediterranean did likewise on the 15th April. On the 19th April a flock of 27 Glossy Ibis flew north off the east side of the Rock. This is only the third record of a species that is increasing in southern Europe with successful breeding in the Coto Doñana in recent years. It is frequently seen in the rice fields around La Janda and winters in northern Morocco in the Larache wetlands and the marshes of Smir, which lie directly south of Gibraltar; the possible origin of these birds.

A Magpie was discovered on Windmill Hill on the 2nd April. It was seen on several occasions at this location and the bird also wandered close to the ringing site at Jews’ Gate. It was last observed at Europa Point on the 17th April, and was seen to belong to the European nominate race and not the African subspecies Pica pica mauretanica, which lacks the white rump and has a characteristic blue exposed fleshy area around the eye. The species is a vagrant to Gibraltar, with only two previous records, on the 14th April 1976 and 17th April 2004. It is a common breeding bird to the east and west of the Iberian Peninsula, but in the Cadiz Province the species is absent, and only recorded occasionally in the Pinar de la Algaida opposite the Coto Doñana National Park. There have been sightings near Vejer de la Frontera in the summer and autumn of 2008, of at least 3 birds, and in the Malaga province the species has also been record-ed away from traditional breeding areas and it may well be expanding its range.
THE EAST SIDE SAND SLOPES - AN UPDATE

For much of the 20th century, the East Side sand slopes were covered with corrugated iron sheets which acted as water catchments. During the early 1990s, the Government and the MOD decided that, since Gibraltar no longer relied on rain for its water supply, it would be cheaper to remove the iron sheets than to maintain them.

During the late 1990s and early 2000s, the habitat was restored, and a programme of reseeding started in 1997. The seeds of some 30 species of plants collected from habitats adjacent to the sand slopes were used to restore the habitat.

As was to be expected, initially, the balance of plant species that flowered on the site was not quite right. For a start there were very few grasses as not many grass seeds had been used in the reseeding programme, and there was a predominance of common species such as snapdragon Antirrhinum majus, hoary mustard Hirschfeldia incana, sweet alison Lobularia maritima, the invasive shrub tobacco Nicotiana glauca, and sticky campion Silene nicoena. An initial survey of the area was carried out in 1998, and 60 different species were recorded from the site.

Over the years, the number of species recorded from the site has increased steadily, with 104 recorded in the last survey in April this year. However, the balance and distribution of species has now settled so that now there is a predominance of grass species. The site now has the aspect of lush grassland, albeit at an angle of around 38º!

Species that are increasing noticeably are

- Tangier fennel F. tingitana, 
- Flax-leaved broom Genista linifolia, 
- Silver sea stock Malcolmia littorea, 
- Gibraltar nuthawood Ononis natrix ramosissima, 
- Olive Olea europeae, and 
- Giant mullein Verbascum giganteum martinezii.

Unfortunately there has also been an increase in the number of introduced, invasive species such as giant reed Arundo donax, 
- Acacia saligna, 
- Acacia cyclops and 
- Paraserianthes (Rhynchosia) loplantha, although thankfully Nicotiana glauca, which initially seemed to be taking over, has now all but disappeared. A programme needs to be drawn up for the removal of these species.

GONHS SHARES TAXI CONCERNS

A recent article in Gibraltar Nature News (No 17, P13) referred to the traffic jams caused by taxis in the area of Prince Philip’s Arch on the Upper Rock. This prompted a response from the Gibraltar Taxi Association. While we do not have a letters section in Gibraltar Nature News, we nevertheless feel it important that their views should be expressed.

In their letter, they make the following points:

- It is difficult to reconcile environmental considerations “with capitalizing on our largest natural asset which generates so much of Gibraltar’s economic wealth.”

There are greater traffic problems at St Michael’s Cave which includes private, largely foreign, cars, causing blockage and fumes.

- Unregulated access to the Upper Rock after 6.15pm results in illegal feeding of macaques and to rubbish accumulations.

- There are regular traffic jams in the access to Apes’ Den, caused by coaches, and not by taxis.

The Association accepts that there is a problem at Prince Philip’s Arch on certain days, but takes exception to the fact that our article did not give the bigger picture.

GONHS has no problem in accepting the bullet points they too are real problems. The article, which was a brief one in the Notes and News section, did not mean to be exhaustive and did not imply that the queue at Prince Philip’s Arch is the one circulation problem on the Upper Rock. It is one of several.

What is clear is that there are untackled problems on the Upper Rock. These were explored at length in the Upper Rock Management Plan (Perez & Bensonau 2005), commissioned by Government and prepared by GONHS after exhaustive research. The Plan makes recommendations that would solve many of these problems, but with few exceptions has not yet been actioned.

We share the concerns of the Taxi Association and GONHS recalls the excellent co-operation between our two organizations in our successful opposition to the Funicular project. We continue to feel that the interests of the Association have to be protected in implementing a management programme for the Upper Rock.

FISHING CONTROVERSY

The Gibraltar Federation of Sea Anglers (GFSA) has been running an aggressive campaign to convince the Government to introduce strict regulation of fishing and other related activities. While GONHS would prefer the enactment of the Marine Reserve Regulations, which GFSA does not support, as the way forward, it nevertheless agrees that regulation is long overdue. Meanwhile the Government has published a consultation paper on its own proposals for regulating marine activities. This will be a subject of a more detailed article in the next Nature News.

The initial reaction of GONHS is that the proposals have a major flaw in treating the matter as a recreational one, administered by the Sports and Leisure Authority, and not by the Ministry for the Environment, which should be the regulating authority.

PERSON FINED FOR TAKING BARNACLES

An unemployed Spanish man who collected goose barnacles from rocks under Europa Point was fined nearly £2000 in court in July. This was his second offence. Goose barnacles, snakelock anemones and other species are frequently taken from Gibraltar’s shoreline, usually by Spanish nationals for sale in Spain. The Royal Gibraltar police has recently been encouraged to enforce laws forbidding these activities more actively than in the past.

POLICE TAKE UP MACAQUE CASES

The Royal Gibraltar Police is investigating two cases of alleged feeding of macaques, an act which contravenes the Criminal Offences Act. This is the first time in recent years that such action is being pursued, and follows a call by the Gibraltar Police Authority, in its latest policing plan, urging the Royal Gibraltar Police to tackle the problem. GONHS has long called on Police support in this, as feeding of macaques in urban areas encourages them to become a nuisance to the public.

VISIT TO SKYE

The Cave Science Unit was invited to the Isle of Skye by Royal Holloway University of London. The aim of this field trip was to perform a cave monitoring exercise in High Pasture Cove located on the island. High Pasture Cave is important to the ongoing project because it is the mirror cave to the caves in Gibraltar. During their stay there, the Unit bivouacked in the wild, several prominent peaks were climbed and a cliff top route explored.

The Unit was away from the 7th to June to the 11th of June. During the Unit’s absence, Joanne McCarthy took care of Governors Cottage and was the point of contact for all queries.

SUBTERRANEAN ACTIVITIES

A study is underway by members of the GONHS Invertebrate Section to investigate Gibraltar’s endemoe or subterranean beetle and ant fauna. Although subterranean faunas are poorly known, the Mediterranean is thought to have an exceptionally rich assemblage of species and Gibraltar appears to be no exception. Already, several rare species have been discovered from the Rock, as well as some undescribed species. The results of these investigations will be published in peer-reviewed entomological journals and will include new species described from Gibraltar.

PERSPEX VISIT TO THE EAST SIDE SAND SLOPES This is the second visit to the East Side Sand slopes. The aim of this visit was to perform a cave monitoring exercise in High Pasture Cove, located on the Isle of Skye. During their stay there, the Unit bivouacked in the wild, several prominent peaks were climbed and a cliff top route explored.

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Ascension is a UK Overseas Territory that lies in the Southern Atlantic, some seven degrees south of the equator (7°57’S, 14°22’W), ca. 1500km from South America. The territory consists of the island of Ascension (approx. 91km²) and a few smaller associated islands and islets, the largest of which is Boatswain Bird Island.

Ascension is extremely isolated, being 1300km from St Helena, its nearest neighbour. Ascension’s origin is volcanic; lava flows and cinder cones are conspicuous throughout. The landscape is dominated by Green Mountain, the island’s peak and a National Park. At only one million years old, Ascension is a young island and this, together with its isolation, explains its relatively species-poor flora and fauna. However, there is a high degree of endemism amongst the native plants and animals, and Ascension is a globally important breeding site for pelagic birds and turtles. Ascension therefore makes its own unique contribution to the rich and varied mosaic of restricted-range and threatened biodiversity that make the UK Overseas Territories internationally important for conservation.

One of the most obvious features of Ascension’s biodiversity is its Green Turtles Chelonia mydas, which have their second largest colony in the Atlantic on the beaches of the island. These were harvested for meat until the 1940s, but are now fully protected and are making a recovery: the increasing breeding population currently stands at some 11,000-15,000 females. Marine life around Ascension is colourful and habitats are in a pristine condition. Its relative lack of diversity compared to other tropical islands is compensated for by its special, unique species: the fauna includes an impressive nine species of endemic fish as well as two endemic shrimps. The Ascension Island Government’s Conservation Department runs a scheme to encourage divers using Ascension’s waters to contribute towards collecting information on the island’s marine biodiversity, with separate programmes for cetaceans, turtles and fish. This measure and many others (such as education programmes for children and weekly articles on conservation in the local ‘Islander’ newspaper) illustrate an enlightened and proactive approach by the authorities, whose willingness to enrol the public in conservation initiatives brings these serious issues closer to people’s hearts and minds.

Most of Ascension’s flora has in fact been introduced by humans. Only some twenty-five species are thought to be native to the island, of which ten are endemic. Four of these unique species have not been located in recent years and are thought to be extinct. The other six - Pteris adscensionis, Asplenium ascensionis, Xiphonopteris ascensionense, Euphorbia organoides, Sporobolus caespitosa and Marattia purpurascens - are still present on the island, although one is Endangered and two are Critically Endangered. None of them are common and it is likely that a recent re-appraisal will lead to these statuses being revised, with most species classified as Critically Endangered. Again, walkers are encouraged to record and report (but not touch) these native plants by the Conservation Department. Because most plant species are introduced, some have inevitably become invasive weeds, prejudicing the survival of native plants. A few of these have a track record as invasive throughout other parts of the world, such as the Mexican Thorn or Mesquite Prosopis juliflora and a species of Prickly Pear Opuntia sp. An endemic plant project involving the Ascension Conservation Department and the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew, funded by OTEP (Overseas Territories Environment Programme), has been successful at propagating and reintroducing some of the endemic plant species, as well as improving habitats for these by removing invasive weeds.

As is to be expected from isolated islands, Ascension is home to several endemic terrestrial invertebrates. The most impressive of these is without doubt Garypus titanus, the world’s largest pseudoscorpion. Along with another species of pseudoscorpion, it is found only on Boatswain Bird Island, which has an area of 5.3 hectares (for our readers in Gibraltar, that is approximately the size of the Alameda Gardens!). Ascension’s indigenous land crab, Johngarthia lagostoma, is only found on Ascension Island and on three small Brazilian islands. The crabs normally live inland both as juveniles (throughout this entire life stage) and as adults (most of the time). However, recent research conducted on Ascension has shown that adults (or at least the females) must undertake annual migrations to the shore for breeding and larval release.

Conservation of invertebrates is, with few exceptions, most effectively achieved by protecting habitats. The endemic invertebrates of Ascension are threatened by the spread of invasive plants, which can radically alter environments. However, invertebrates have also helped to control the spread of invasive flora: the moth Cactoblastis cactorum was introduced to
Ascension from South America to help control the invasive Prickly Pear. Such control methods are safest in very isolated places such as Ascension from which the moth cannot disperse. Similar programmes in the Caribbean have resulted in the unintended spread of this moth to other territories and countries, threatening native species of cacti. Two species of seed-boring bruchids, Algarobius prosopis and Neltumius arizonensis, were introduced to Ascension in the late 1990s in the hope of reducing the spread of Mexican Thorn. There is evidence that these beetles are doing considerable damage to the Mexican Thorn, as is a psyllid native to the Caribbean, Heteropsylla reducta, which is presumed to have arrived with the plant when it was introduced to Ascension.

Boatswain Bird Island is extremely important as a breeding site for many thousands of seabirds, the most notable of which is the endemic Ascension Frigate Bird Fregata aquila, with a global population of some 10,000 birds. The remarkable similarity between different species of Frigate Birds make these extremely difficult to identify at sea, but the Ascension Frigate Bird appears to occur off the coast of West Africa outside of the breeding season, returning to Ascension to reproduce. These and other species of boobies, petrels and terns all bred on the main island until humans arrived, bringing with them two mammals that have wreaked havoc on island avifaunas worldwide: cats and rats. This reduced the breeding population of seabirds, once estimated at some twenty million breeding pairs, to a few small colonies on offshore islets. However, the Ascension Seabird Restoration Project, run by the Ascension Conservation Department and assisted by the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds and the UK’s Foreign & Commonwealth Office, has succeeded in eradicating feral cats from the main island. This has led to a gradual return of breeding seabirds to Ascension Island, with five of eleven species now back (but not yet the Ascension Frigate Bird). Unlike seabirds, terrestrial species unfortunately could not nest on other islets nearby to avoid the introduced predators. This led to the extinction of the Ascension Rail Atlantisa elpens, which was only found on the main island.

Ascension forms part of a single UK Overseas Territory with St Helena and Tristan da Cunha, the Governor of which resides in St Helena. It has a small population of some 1100 people, although it has no native population. Most of those present on the island are civilian contractors from St Helena, some civilian contractors from the UK and military personnel from the UK and US. In spite of its tiny, non-native population, efforts to study and conserve Ascension’s biodiversity are managed extremely well. Although a myriad of factors, such as the scale of some of the problems faced, under-resourcing and under-staffing, make their task very difficult, the Ascension Island Government’s Conservation Department must surely be very proud of its role in attempting to interpret and conserve the unique contributions that this isolated volcanic island and its associated islets offer to global biodiversity. Information on Ascension’s wildlife, and the important work carried out by the Conservation Department, can be found on the Department’s website (http://www.ascensionconservation.org.ac/).
The Society organised a day-long seminar on 8 May in the Moroccan town of M’diq, 47 kilometres directly south of Gibraltar, on the Mediterranean coast of the Tangier Peninsula. The seminar was on the theme of the protection of the biodiversity of the Smir wetlands. It was hosted by GONHS with the participation also of the Scientific Institute of the University of Rabat-Agdal, and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) from M’diq. Also present were representatives of schools, local government officials, and local and regional press and TV.

The aim of the seminar was to present the results of four years of research in the wetlands by a team from GONHS and Rabat as part of GIBMANATUR, the Gibraltar-Morocco Interreg project funded by the European Union and the Government of Gibraltar. It was organised in order to bring to local associations and to the general public the value of the habitats and wildlife of the area, which is unique in the region of the Strait of Gibraltar, and is in danger of disappearing through development.

The meeting, which proceeded in Arabic and French, was addressed in the opening session by Professor Mohamed Mouna from Rabat Scientific Institute, Dr John Cortes from GONHS, Imad M’Birek from the Association Laguna Smir, and Rachid Dendabi from the Association d’Acción Cultural de M’diq. Following this there were technical presentations from experts on the flora and fauna of the area, with Soumaya Hammada presenting the botanical talk, Mohamed Mouna talking on insects, Abdeljebbar Qninba and Mohamed Amezian on birds, Mohamed Mediani on reptiles and amphibians and Mohammed Aziz El Agbani on general conservation principles.

These talks were followed by an enthusiastic discussion of which one of the conclusions was the creation of a committee to fight for the protection of the wetlands and to try and reverse the latest development plans for the area.

The Smir wetlands, the last significant wetlands in the area of the Strait, hold a wide variety of species, including birds rare elsewhere in Morocco and possibly a previously unknown form of bird which the GIBMANATUR project confirmed for the first time was nesting in the marshes, in habitat now under serious threat.

The campaigners, while facing a hard struggle, take heart from recent declarations by the King of Morocco in favour of the protection of the Kingdom’s natural assets, including the major wildlife sites.

Although the Interreg Project itself expired about a year ago, and no more Gibraltar-Morocco funds have been identified by the EU, GONHS continues committed to work in Morocco and to develop further the many excellent contacts that have been made. The reception given by the representatives of the people of M’diq to the Gibraltar delegation, made up of John Cortes and Leslie Linares, showed how strong the links have become.

The Save the Smir Lagoon campaign has a Facebook page, “Défendons Marja Asmir.”

The Gibraltar contingent - John Cortes and Leslie Linares

The New Lagoon offering hope of a future if properly cared for

The end in sight - John Cortes and Mohamed Amezian look upon the works overtaking the Smir wetlands