

COMMENTARY

Soqotra's Transformation Process: A Social Science Perspective

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Change is the genome of both society and nature: That is, change is intrinsic to society's development and nature's evolution. Yet, the dominant narrative about Soqotra's environment and community is one that conflates social change with environmental damage, and even "ecological tsunami." This is evident in a series of recent hyperbolic and anachronistic descriptions of Soqotra's people and environment. Two representative samples taken from recent policy documents are offered. The first ignores the island's complex economic geography and depicts Soqotrans as if they were inhabitants of Arcadia, an idyllic pastoral abode frozen in time: "They live by fishing, herding livestock, date cultivation and gathering plant products – a lifestyle that has changed little since the first settlers arrived 2000 years ago." The second likens Soqotra's environment to Noah's Ark: "The natural environment of Soqotra has retained an impressive level of integrity till present date, making it the equivalent of a precious Noah's Ark, where ancient flora and fauna, as well as an associated unique culture and traditions, have survived until the present day." In addition to these historically uninformed and primitivizing descriptions of the island and its inhabitants, there is the problematic status of the knowledge of Soqotra's environmental problems, which is mostly anecdotal. That is, it is not based on sustained empirical research but on logical deduction and hasty generalizations from unsystematic observations, and that usually and prematurely blame Soqotrans' livelihood practices. I offer two examples from recently published sources: The first is the presumption of an "overgrazing problem" in the absence of adequate data on the animal population and of its distribution, and without taking into consideration the actual human population distribution in settlements around the island: "Human population movements to larger settlements, where the practice of keeping a household herd in addition to the main one increases the pressure of grazing around these settlements." The fact is that outside the two main urban agglomerations of the island, only 22, from over 600, villages have a population of more than 200 inhabitants, and nearly all of which are on the least biodiversity endowed coastal zones, according to the 2004 census. The second is the existence of a contrived "wood fuel crisis" that is claimed to be leading to "vanishing forests" in Soqotra, which is based on a catastrophic scenario analysis and not on the testimonies of local residents or on multiple sampling of regions of the island, and without considering external aggravating factors (e.g., climate change) or internal mitigating factors (e.g., increasing use of cooking gas): "Rural and urban population growth and the associated demand for wood as fuel for domestic consumption have induced uncontrolled deforestation and widespread destruction of the semiarid forest biome."

Both, the condescending ascription of Soqotrans as denizens of Arcadia and shipmates from Noah's Ark, and the Cassandra-like environmental predictions are couched in the language of advocacy, which was useful in raising the attention of the world vis-à-vis the need to protect Soqotra's environment, but is no longer an adequate foundation for environmental policy. Moreover, these descriptions reflect the external observers' environmental perceptions inspired by a fear of the impending demise of "a *self-sufficient* pastoral society" that never existed in Soqotra, and that neglect Soqotrans' aspiration for socio-economic advancement. As a result, there is an absence of a shared valuation of the environment between well-intentioned environmentalists and most Soqotrans, which has led to the adoption of a conservation policy for Soqotra that suffers from what I call the "let's save them from modernity" syndrome: A form of modernization-prevention on the island that far exceeds the exigencies of its environmental conservation. This policy has not only reified conservation and development into two mutually exclusive alternatives, but also alienated Soqotrans from recent environmental conservation initiatives. This is evident in the summary evaluation of Soqotrans' problematic reception of the main environmental conservation initiative: "Although SCDP [Soqotra Conservation & Development Project] and SCF [Soqotra Conservation Fund] have been working with local communities for nearly 10 years, perceptions of local benefits that can be derived from biodiversity remain tentative at best... Even though the CZP [Conservation Zoning Plan] was developed in a highly participatory manner, local communities did not immediately support the enforcement of the conservation zones... Local communities only cooperate with the project because they hope to benefit directly from the *project* rather than from the *outcomes* of the project" (SGBP project document, 2008:9).

This unfavorable, yet accurate, assessment of over a decade of conservation work on the island begs for an explanation, which I locate in the continuing contradiction between project objectives and Soqotrans' socio-economic priorities. This is the consequence of ignoring the changes in the socio-cultural context of the islanders that resulted from the institutional modifications and economic interventions of different political regimes over the last century, and which have transformed Soqotrans' relationship to their environment. This unawareness of historical change and the assumption of cultural continuity from "2000 years ago" have resulted in a crucial disjuncture between the environmental ethos of conservation policy designers and Soqotrans: In the case of the policy designers they adopted a virtual standpoint, which was driven by an abstract ahistorical thinking that modeled the island's environment into unrealistic maps of zones to be protected, and structured the use of its resources within a regulatory framework that was more responsive to global environmental concerns than to Soqotrans' lived experience in their local environment. In the case of Soqotrans, they embodied a practical outlook, which stemmed from experiential learning in their quest for effective material and social practices for livelihood-making adapted to the island's natural settings as well as to climatic change and government economic policies.

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This disjuncture in environmental ethos led to an inadequate policy vis-à-vis the current historical period in Soqotra. The adopted policy, as described in the CZP and in the rationale of UN projects and EU planning documents, sought to recreate an "ecological community" based on "environmental practices of eons", which were in use until the time of the Sultan. This was a period of seasonal food shortages, which engendered chronic hunger because Soqotrans were primarily reliant on nature's bounty as well as its vagaries. Then, the prevailing human-environment ethic was based on a relationship of commensality: That is, livelihood was intrinsically guided by the judicious consumption, sharing and conserving of environmental resources as a communal virtue. However, by the time of the UN intervention in the mid 1990s, the nature of the human-environment relations in Soqotra had already changed. From the early 1970s onward, the state partially substituted itself for nature, and thus shifted Soqotrans' dependency from the environment to its institutions, which modified their relationship with the environment. Moreover, this period heralded the establishment of a parallel economy to the previously dominant pastoral economy, namely an urban and coastal-based economy that offered alternative means of livelihoods (e.g., fishing, office jobs, tourism, etc) with a regular salary instead of the cashless subsistence pastoral livelihood of the rural economy; thereby initiating an inexorable shift in economic orientation: From an environmental dependency to a cash dependency that has been accelerating ever since.

Finally, the disengagement of Soqotrans from Soqotra's environmental protection initiatives' locally mal-adapted objectives, will persist until environmental policy for Soqotra is based on the following: (a) the empirical assessment (not logical deduction) of Soqotra's environmental problems framed within the island's historical continuum, and informed by Soqotrans' evolving economic incentives and social needs, and the corresponding mutations in their livelihood practices, and environmental values; and (b), the government's official recognition of the Soqotri language as the ultimate repository of the island's rich repertoire of traditional ecological knowledge, given the inextricable interdependency between biodiversity and cultural diversity conservation.

Notes:

* He has D.Phil in social anthropology and is currently completing a book which elaborates on the themes of this article.

Republic of Yemen, (2006) *Socotra Archipelago: Proposal for Inclusion in the World Heritage List of UNESCO*. Sana'a: Ministry of Environment and Water, p. 40.

Ibid., p. 6.

A. G. Miller and M. Morris, (2004) *Ethnoflora of the Soqotra Archipelago*. Edinburgh: The Royal Botanical Garden Edinburgh, p. 42.

G. Orlando and B. Mies (2001) "Vanishing Forests and sustainable Development of an Arid Island, Soqotra (Yemen): An Example," *Insula* 10:2 (September), p. 97.

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Donation to Soqotri Physician

Dr. Khalid Sorour, Professor of Cardiology, Cardiology Dept. Kasr Al Ain Hospital, Faculty of Medicine, Cairo University, Egypt, donated \$500 (five hundred dollars) to Dr. Salem Yousef to help him with the necessary expenses for his year in UK studying tropical paediatrics at Liverpool University this year, funded by the British-Yemeni Society. This period of study includes time spent in the field on Soqotra carrying out research towards his final degree. We are glad to report that Dr. Salem has just returned safely from this period of field work and is now continuing his studies in Liverpool.

Obituary — Margaret Munro

We are sorry to have to report the death last October of Miss Margaret Munro, a founder member of the Friends of Soqotra, and a woman who had been a great traveller and mountain-climber in her youth. She was very interested in Soqotra, and only old age and ill-health frustrated her plans for making a trip to the island. She was a generous supporter of the Friends of Soqotra, contributing generously to many projects on the island, including the Soqotra Public Library, the Soqotra Folk Museum and the collections of early photographs of the island which were distributed to these two organisations. She read every publication about the island she could get hold of, and welcomed the FoS representative for Oman, Ahmad Sa'ad Tahki, and his wife, Sa'idah, to her home in Edinburgh. In her will she left a most generous bequest to the Friends of Soqotra, stipulating that it be used for the benefit of the islanders for 'the conservation and preservation of their unique island'.



Gathering summer fuel



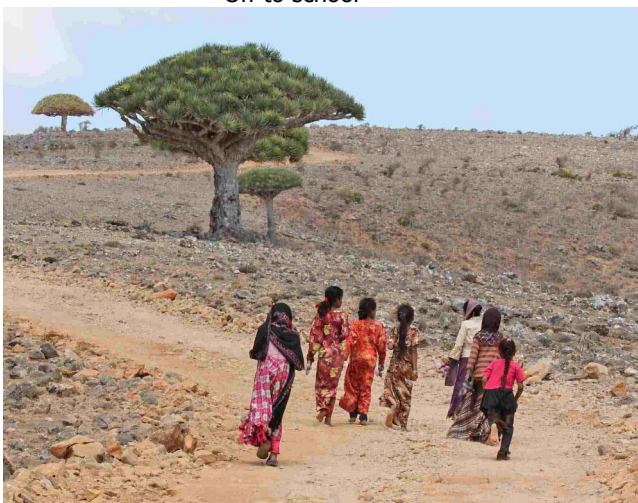
Hadibu fish souk



Off to school



The morning catch



Towards the national tree



Washing clothes

All photos by
Richard Porter,
spring 2011