

Declaration

Gilf Kebir Protected Area

Press release

On January 4th 2006 the Prime Minister, H.E. Ahmed Nazif, signed a decree (No. 10 of 2007) to establish the Gilf Kebir as Egypt's newest protected area. The decree has formally created one of the world's largest protected areas extending over 47,940 km² of the Western (Libyan) Desert which is almost 5% of Egypt's land area and one and a half times the size of Belgium. This decree followed the earlier declaration of the Northern Red Sea islands in August 2006 which together increases the number of protected areas in Egypt to 26, covering over 143,833 km² which represents about 14.3% of the country. The Gilf Kebir Protected Area alone has increased the formally declared protected area coverage of Egypt by over 50%.

The declaration of this large protectorate in one of the world's most hyper-arid areas is particularly appropriate as the United Nations declared 2006 as the International Year for Deserts and Desertification. This new protected area will extend the conservation coverage of the Saharo-Arabian floristic province which generally has been poorly represented and it is hoped that the Gilf Kebir protected area will eventually constitute part of a larger trans-boundary protected area shared with Libya and Sudan.

Background Information on Gilf Kebir

The Gilf Kebir area is particularly notable for the pre-historic rock art and artifacts that abound in the area and are testament to human adaptation to past changes in climate, and from where lessons may be learned as we confront the challenges of contemporary climatic changes. Research on these topics has been carried out in the Gilf Kebir area for many years by the Egyptian Geological Survey and the Universities of Berlin and Cologne, Germany.

This new protected area includes the two most prominent landscape features of Egypt's south-west, the Gilf Kebir and Gebal Uweinat. In this remote corner of Egypt, the Gilf Kebir (the Great Barrier), a huge limestone and sandstone plateau, rises over 300 meters above the desert floor (1075 meters above sea level); its heavily eroded sides are deeply dissected by wadis that have been penetrated by incredible dune systems. The Gilf Kebir plateau extends over 7,700 km², approximately the size of Switzerland, and contains the Kebira Crater, a 950-meter wide impact crater dating to 50 million years ago and part of a huge meteor field that spreads over 4,500 square kilometers.

Included in the new protected area is the largest known deposit of a natural silica glass, (98% SiO₂) on earth. The silica glass is distributed over an area approximately 130 km long by 50 km wide to the north of the Gilf Kebir. The origin of the silica glass is uncertain but scientific dates of the glass give a mean of around 28 million years. The composition and structure of the glass are consistent with a hypothesis that the glass was formed from melted desert dune sand and

subsequently cooled in an Earth atmosphere – which suggests that meteor impact was the cause

Gabal Uweinat, situated approximately 150 kilometers south of Gilf Kebir, is a large ancient (Precambrian) granite and sandstone massif rising like an island at the centre of the Libyan Desert, and shared between Egypt, Libya and Sudan (Map). It rises to over 1,930 meters above sea level; the western part consists of a ring shaped granite intrusion, 25 kilometres in diameter, ending in three wadis towards the west, Karkur Hamid, Karkur Idriss and Karkur Ibrahim, The eastern section consists of ancient sandstones and terminates at Karkur Talh; in Karkur Murr there is the oasis of Ain al-Brins (Bir Murr) with its permanent spring.

The granitic part is located entirely in Libya, while the eastern sandstone part, a series of high plateaus, lie mainly in Sudan, while the northern flanks jut into Egypt.

The Gilf Kebir and Uweinat area is world renowned for its prehistoric (Neolithic) engravings (petroglyphs) and rock paintings including those at Karkur Talh and Karkur Murr: these major eastern valleys of the Uweinat contain one of the richest concentrations of rock art in the whole Sahara. Wadi Sora lies in the northwestern Gilf Kebir where the "Cave of Swimmers" of The English Patient fame, is to be found. Recent discoveries have revealed many other incredible sites dating back over 7,000 years, and there is certainly much more to be explored. This awesome natural setting is unquestionably one of the richest storehouses of prehistoric rock art in the world and now pre-historians believe it represents the area and environment from which the civilisation that eventually flowered along the Nile Valley first emerged.

The hyper-arid area contains a surprisingly diverse and important desert adapted fauna and flora typical of the Saharo–Arabian province. Some of the wadis are well vegetated with *Acacia raddianna* trees, and shrubs such as *Zilla spinosa*, *Fagonia thebaica*, and *Caligonum commosum*, which can remain green for several years after rare rainfall events when other ephemeral plants appear.

Animal life is richest around vegetation, but living creatures can also be found hundreds of kilometres from the closest plant and water. Insects are the most abundant but the plants also support much larger animal species; the few mammals that do manage to survive in this arid environment are scarce and usually nocturnal, such as various species of gerbils (*Gerbillus*) and jerboas (*Jaculus*) and Ruppel's fox (*Vulpes rueppeli*). The supremely arid-adapted Dorcas gazelle (*Gazella dorcas*) inhabit the wadis on the plain to the south of Uweinat and until recently the rarer waddan, or barbary sheep (*Ammotragus lervia*) was relatively abundant in the Gilf and at Uweinat, where a relict population is still found. Several large animals have become extinct in the recent past. Until 70 years ago addax, a large desert antelope with graceful spiral horns, and the Scimitar-horned Oryx (*Oryx dammah*) could be found in the area and ostriches used to be relatively abundant until hunting pressure became unsustainable.

There are few permanent bird inhabitants. The most common is the "Zarzur" or White Crowned Wheatear (*Oenanthe leucopyga*), which is common all across the Sahara and white wagtails (*Motacilla alba*) are also relatively frequent. As many of

the great bird migration routes pass over the Libyan Desert, the massifs and the area also attracts numerous bird species on their spring and autumn migrations.

In recent years the Gilf Kebir and Jebal Uweinat area have become an increasingly important premium destination for the more adventurous travellers, not just for the rock art, but also for the sheer majesty and scale of the desert landscape. The development and implementation of proper management is vital if the values of the area are to be secured and this presents the Egyptian authorities with a major challenge.

The huge Gilf Kebir Protected area will constitute one of the world's largest conservation areas; furthermore it is located in a hyper-arid and very remote region where the nearest settlement of Dahkla is over 350 kilometers away. The conservation management of this area will present major challenges but at the same time it will provide an opportunity to explore innovative methods such as the desert operator and guide certification initiative that was recently started for the White Desert National Park in Egypt. This then may be an example for conservation areas elsewhere which requires similarly unique management arrangement to facilitate practical and effective management.

To accomplish this task the Nature Conservation Sector of the Ministry of State for Environmental Affairs is now planning a 20 day expedition to the Gilf Kebir and Jebal Uweinat in February 2007. The expedition will consist of a multi-disciplinary team made up of NCS staff members together with specialists in biodiversity, geology, protected area management, pre-history, archaeology, including members from the Supreme Council of Antiquities and the University of Cologne, Germany. In addition there will be a number of Western Desert tour operators who will be providing the logistical support and guidance as well as offering co-management advice for the area. The expedition will be documenting the site and examining management issues in the area in order to devise practical ways to introduce appropriate measures in this remote area. The main concern will be visitor management and safety aspects generally and specifically for destinations such as archaeological sites and geological features of high visitor interest.

Furthermore the Egyptian Government, together with the Heinrich-Barth-Institute of Cologne, is pursuing an initiative to have the Gebal Uweinat section inscribed as a UNESCO trans-boundary World Heritage Cultural Landscape shared by Egypt, Libya and Sudan. The formal protection of the area was the first step in the process of having it inscribed on the World Heritage list.

The declaration of the Gilf Kebir has been the culmination of a planning effort for protected areas that has been supported by the Italian Government for nearly 10 years, through the Italian Development Cooperation and the Italian Egyptian Debt Swap Programme.

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