

Evaluating the Soqotra Heritage Project



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Introduction

Heritage Context in the Soqatra Archipelago

The Soqatra Archipelago is one of 21 Governorates of the Republic of Yemen. It lies approximately 380km south of Yemen and the westernmost island, Abd al Kuri, lies approximately 120km east of Cape Guardafui on the northeast coast of Somalia. It has a population that varies considerably but is currently in the region of 60,000, with a high proportion centered on the two main urban areas – the capital Hadiboh and the second city Qalansiyah – with the majority of the population living on the north coast. Soqatra is one of the poorest regions in one of the poorest states on Earth, and one which is currently suffering from conflict, external influence, aridification and poverty. Yemen is listed 2nd out of 179 states in the Fragile States Index behind only Somalia.

Despite the fact that Soqatra is famed in a contemporary sense for its unique and unusual biodiversity – with an array of endemic plants, insects, reptiles and birds leading to its inscription on the World Heritage List in 2008 – its deep and varied cultural heritage and history has been largely ignored in terms of resources and research. Compared even to other states in the Middle East and beyond, there are no officially recognized, demarcated or preserved heritage sites on Soqatra and until recently only a single representative of Yemen's official body responsible for heritage protection – the General Organization for Antiquities and Museums with its Head Office in Aden – was in position. Resources beyond a minimal stipend for its single representative and a nominated Minister for Culture as part of the Soqatra Governorate are practically zero.

Training heritage professionals on Soqatra was therefore essentially impossible until recently as there were no heritage professionals locally and no designated sites to protect. As a result, the condition of tangible heritage was largely unknown, and a strong perception of the loss of traditions – including the unwritten Soqotri language – was evident informally.

It was against this background that the Soqatra Heritage Project was founded in 2017 initially with support from the Cultural Protection Fund.

The Soqatra Heritage Project

The Soqatra Heritage Project is an informal title that represents the work of a team of heritage experts on the Soqatra Archipelago – part of the Republic of Yemen – and their supporting partners.

The programme grew out of a local recognition that while the outstanding and unique biodiversity of Soqatra had received much attention and global funding, the same focus and resources had not been available to study and conserve the varied and unique cultural heritage of the islands in all its forms. The programme first received funding in 2017 from the Cultural Protection Fund and has subsequently received funds again from the Cultural Protection Fund, The Aliph Foundation and the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council. A website that seeks to introduce Soqotri heritage and the efforts to protect it is maintained at: <https://www.soqotraculturalheritage.org>

The programme was initially set up to identify and train a local cohort of Soqotri people that had a passion for heritage and a desire to preserve it. Initial identification of individuals in 2017 led to the establishment of a small team who subsequently received training in a wide range of documentation techniques applicable to both tangible and intangible heritage in all its forms.

Outreach and engagement were built into the programme at an early stage. One of the key skills the team focused on delivering was the use of film not only to document heritage components, but to use film as an engagement tool. This was most fully developed in the first phase of the project through documentation of the development of a theatre production in late 2019 and has subsequently been used in a range of formats to bring heritage to communities across Soqotra and to engage with heritage professionals about a range of subjects.

Evaluation of the Soqotra Heritage Project

Following completion of the initial phase of the programme in early 2020, it was recognized that assessment of the impact of the work over the medium term would provide an opportunity for learning in a remote and under-resourced location. As a result, funds were granted to evaluate aspects of the programme in 2023.

This evaluation programme was not designed to re-visit programme elements and decide whether the Aims and Objectives of both the Cultural Protection Fund and the Soqotra Heritage Project had been achieved and had resulted in medium-term benefits beyond the life of the project.

Specifically, it was designed to assess how communities and stakeholders had responded to project activities in ways that are difficult to enumerate, and to capture responses visually that would otherwise be lost. Further, it was designed to assess how the project activities had allowed participants to engage with and take ownership of their own heritage through engagement activities, and by telling their own stories. Further elements of the project related to ethics, gender, and personal development were examined through a series of engagements and interviews both with community participants and with Soqotra Heritage Project team members. Importantly, speaking to community members and participants about the process of transforming oral histories and traditions into tangible events was designed to give insight into mechanisms that engage people with their heritage long term and enthuse them to take action to preserve heritage that they felt was being lost – often through a disconnect between generations.

Two distinct parts of the programme were evaluated:

- Firstly, a cultural heritage festival in the town of Qalansiyah, which featured a theatre production by a group of schoolchildren that was developed from local stories into a performance at the festival in late 2019.
- Secondly, the establishment of Soqotra's first official protected archaeological monument by Government Decree at a recently re-discovered and documented rock art site that was under threat from housing development.

The Soqotra Heritage Project team has attempted to build routine and ongoing monitoring and evaluation into its work from the start. This has been based upon the belief that involving discussions and interviews with all local stakeholders gives a sense of ownership and engagement, and that the stories being told are local stories encompassing engagement and change that is passed through the community via a variety of mechanisms – many of which are informal. Much of this has been accomplished through the use of film to engage directly with communities and actors, and to record and learn from direct interactions with those actors.

Following on from the presentation of the theatre production in 2019 a film was made that documented the process and the transitions achieved in different sectors of Socotri society. While this film has yet to be released into the public domain – the COVID pandemic put paid to immediate plans for that – it has been shown widely in community screenings across Soqotra. Three and a half years after the event, and following the challenges of the global pandemic, key participants were engaged in order to recount their experiences and what the outcomes were in the mid-term.

At the rock art site, the programme achieved formal and legal protection through actively engaging with the local community and community leaders as well as Government officials. This resulted in

not only documented protection but also the building of a low protective wall and an interpretation panel on site. Stakeholders were re-engaged to discuss what had changed – if anything – at this site in the intervening years, whether the site was still in good condition and had not suffered any direct damage or neglect, and whether the local community perceived any increased value due to these activities.

Qalansiyah Heritage Festival Evaluation

In late 2019, following on from two heritage festivals hosted in 2017 in both Hadiboh and Qalansiyah, a further event was planned. Rather than replicating previous events, which had been designed to showcase a variety of Soqotra performing arts, this event was designed as a community-led workshop to engage young people with Soqotri heritage. While many intangible heritage traditions had been recorded by the SHP team, this had not yet engaged directly with traditional folk tales despite a range of these having been translated and published in a variety of literary sources (all external to the island at the time). Further, the team had been enthused by the performances of a local theatre group in Qalansiyah and following from discussion with the local team and stakeholders it was felt that developing a theatrical interpretation of traditional stories could be a good way to engage young people. This type of programme had never been seen on the island previously.

Theatre workshops were undertaken over a two week period in 2019. These involved a process of selecting young people to participate – no mean feat given the number of interested children and families – and alongside training and story development, acting and the use of props, music and equipment the children also visited their elders to listen to and record traditional stories that could be interpreted as a theatrical event.

Even during the workshops, the upcoming event started to permeate into the local community. A particular example was a young girl who learnt a lullaby from her grandmother which was incorporated into the production – yet even on the day that this had first been suggested in the workshop, the lullaby could be heard being sung in Qalansiyah, from windows, on the beach and elsewhere. The young girl who sang the lullaby in the event later claimed she had become famous for her part in the play, and that her family were proud of her as a result.

In order to record whether this event was still remembered almost four years later, and whether it had left any long-term impact on community members and stakeholders, filmmaker Oliver Wilkins returned to Qalansiyah in late summer 2023 accompanied by Research Fellow at the Institute of Development Studies Sofya Shahab the alongside the Soqotra Heritage Project team who both facilitated interviews and also contributed to evaluation by discussing their experiences of the theatre event with Oliver and also discussion of their learning journey with Sofya.



Children performing at the Qalansiyah heritage Festival in late 2019

Interviewing and filming participants revealed a range of outcomes, some of which are directly related to engagement with heritage and others which go beyond heritage and have impacted individuals in different ways.

From a heritage perspective, it was noticeable in participants that all of them recalled the events of 2019 in Qalansiyah and that this was a still frequently discussed heritage related event. It should be taken in context that many of those individuals were likely to have had an interest in heritage already due to their attendance at the festival and perhaps do not fully represent community members who attended the event but were not directly involved in it beyond that attendance. Nevertheless, well over 2000 people attended the event in a town of perhaps 5000 individuals.

However it was also noted by several individuals that in fact discussion about heritage was engaged beyond participants and stakeholders – primarily in the way that the children has chosen to interpret local stories in particular ways. Many of these stories and tales are told in different forms by different individuals and within different families, and discussion of these different forms was at times intense during and following the event in 2019 – community members engaged in direct discussion about their heritage and this was brought about by a community event that otherwise would not have occurred. It was also noted that this event focused solely on Soqotri tales told in the Soqotri language – and while other heritage festivals have been funded and organized on Soqotra in recent years these have often focused on the inclusion of other languages and wider regional heritage within them. It is not apparent whether these festivals and their organizers have undertaken evaluation of the impact of their events and whether such engagement as that noted above was a feature of those events also.

Participants in the event itself – primarily the children – advocated a range of effects that the event had had on them. Some had grown in self-confidence and were less nervous around their peers and elders through direct engagement with them. Others had developed the courage to engage with people more directly, even to the point of presenting stories in festivals hosted at a later date and also as part of outreach campaigns that visited different parts of the island. In this way, engagement with their own heritage had effects that could likely not have been foreseen, but that the individuals recognized and appreciated.

The use of words such as “fear” and “intimidation” and how the event removed these feelings from participants can be realized. Several individuals mentioned that they used to fear or be intimidated generally, and by interacting with people, yet their participation in the event had removed these negative perceptions from them. When presenting their heritage stories, audiences would comment how the actors seemed to have no fear, that they were confident to interpret and enact these stories for other people and this was seen as a positive outcome.

Rock Art site (SHP067) Evaluation

The rock art site SHP067 consists of approximately 187 petroglyphs that have been pecked into flat and convex plates of calcarenite limestone that has been extensively weathered in many parts of the site. Based on the rock art motifs the site is believed to date to at least the fourth century CE, and is the second largest petroglyph site on Soqotra. The importance of this site was first recognised in 2018 as part of the wider archaeological survey of the island by the Soqotra Heritage Project (SHP), when it was fully documented and published (Jansen van Rensburg *et al.* 2018). During this survey it was clear that the site was under imminent threat from development, with several parts of the site having been demarcated as plots for buildings. As such, the SHP team helped to bring together local villagers, government officials, the General Organisation for Antiquities and Museums (GOAM) and the governor of Soqotra to protect the site, which was inscribed as a protected archaeological site on 19 June 2019 - the first time this has ever taken place on Soqotra. In addition to the protective measures put in place an interpretive board was placed at the site and a series of school and official visits were organised to highlight the importance of this site and create awareness.



School children visiting rock art site SHP067 in early 2020 to learn about and record the various motifs present.

In January 2024, during a fieldwork visit to Soqotra, a general survey was undertaken to assess the site both in terms of the site's physical condition and how it was perceived locally. A general assessment of the site was carried out by Julian Jansen van Rensburg and the Soqotra Heritage Project team. As part of this assessment the local team were also provided with additional training in the recording of rock art, 3D photogrammetry and the use of a Total Station. The aim of this survey was to comprehensively record the site and each rock art motif to allow for an updated condition assessment to be made. During this assessment it is clear that, due to the increasing frequency of strong rains on Soqotra, several areas across the site have been negatively impacted and that there is a clear weathering of the motifs. While the motifs are still visible, with increasingly frequent storms there is a need for protection measures to be implemented. Overall, however, neither the site nor the interpretation board had been vandalised or damaged by surrounding development works, which had completely altered the surrounding landscape – a clear indication that the protected status had ensured protection of the site due to the fact that protection was mediated through engagement with the local community and relevant stakeholders. However, there is no doubt that some remedial work to repair the surrounding low wall – which has been damaged by cyclones - and re-assessment of the physical protection measures would benefit the site.

Based on interviews with local villagers, tour guides, and government officials the site remains an important cultural heritage site on Soqotra. When considering the protection of cultural heritage sites on Soqotra the governor and other government officials refer to SHP067 as a positive example of what should be done to protect and preserve additional sites. Interviews with local villagers are, however, ambivalent insofar as while they recognise the importance of the site and will visit it with their children, they receive no additional benefits from the increasing level of visits

by tourists. However, when speaking with other villages, specifically those near the rock art site of Eriosh where land is being bought and developed by overseas investors, there is a call to protect the site 'as was done in Hadiboh (SHP067)'. As such it demonstrates that the protection of SHP067 has created a wider sense of awareness with local people that cultural heritage is both important and in need of protection.

Interviews with tourists and tour guides is varied in that local tour guides include SHP067 to their tourist itinerary when their tourists are in Hadiboh or pass close to the site when traveling to the more well-known touristic sites to the east, whereas overseas tour operators are either unaware of the site or will at times include it when tourists are in Hadiboh due to its proximity. It is clear that the local community derive no tangible benefit from these visits, as is the case in some other locations on Soqatra.

While schools have visited the sites during past outreach activities, the lack of funding to get school children to visit the sites has meant that these events have not been replicated. While the teachers that had visited SHP067 during these events have expressed a desire for new students to be shown the site and for incorporating cultural heritage events and activities within the school curriculum, this has of yet not been possible due to a lack of resources.



Cyclone damage to the protective wall at rock art site SHP067 in 2022.

Gender

There is no doubt that the impact of participation in the event in Qalansiyah in 2019 is perceived differently by male and female participants. Male participants were happy to be interviewed and to discuss directly their roles in the event and how it had affected them, as well as continuing to engage with heritage and participate in additional events. Female participants were less willing to be filmed, although would be happy to discuss their experiences off camera with female interviewers. In some cases this was directly linked to the age of the participants – four years after

the event, many of the female participants were approaching or were of marriageable age and were concerned that their prior involvement being in the visible public domain may affect them at that time, with additional concerns of how their families and peers would perceive them in a contemporary sense – whereas this was not an issue when they were younger and perceived as “children”.

This is not unexpected but raises some interesting points.

Firstly, while not unexpected it is also important to recognize this when planning future events, outreach and education, and how these are presented, perceived and advertised. Importantly, how perceptions change over time and affect the presentation must be considered and brought into project planning and also project sustainable management – just because a participant or their guardian agrees to participate at one time does not mean they are of the same mind several years later.

Secondly, despite this gender bias, it is also to be noted that many of the stories and cultural traditions are upheld by women in society, and many aspects of the theatre production in 2019 were directly derived from female family members of the participants themselves. Some of these traditions that are upheld by women are not in the public domain – for example the traditional poetry in the Soqotri language is perceived to be a male tradition but in fact there are a number of female poets - but these almost never perform poetry in public at festivals.



Mixed gender theatre workshop in Qalansiyah, 2019

Research Ethics and Prior Informed Consent

As mentioned above, it became apparent during this evaluation process that engaging with community members – including children – and asking them to participate and discussing under what conditions this would be acceptable is only a first step – it cannot be assumed that understanding and signing a document at the start of a programme means you can continue to have the same expectations of individuals and how their participation is perceived based upon a single agreement at a fixed point in time. This may not be a new recognition, but this form of evaluation is a novelty on Soqotra and has not been conducted previously in this way. Further, the

use of visual media clearly has additional potential impact on how people see themselves as being perceived, in a way that an inaccessible written document would not.

Prior Informed Consent by definition represents an agreement made before an activity commences – but building such agreements not just into a defined project but across a long-term and sustainable programme is challenging yet essential to ensure all participants feel the benefit of that engagement and do not suffer any misconception or negative effect based upon a lack of routine engagement by external actors. This programme – including both local team members and external partners – has learned that routine outreach, impact monitoring and evaluation needs to be built into long-term planning and that existing outputs must be re-evaluated over time depending on the situation of the participants, their families and their communities. It is also important to remember that while project partners may wish their work with communities to have its impact documented, such activities depend on whether the participants wish to be involved. If any key participant has a story to tell, it must be told under their own volition and cannot be encouraged or manipulated in any way. This is especially pertinent when a programme engages with participants at different ages and stages of their lives, and the decisions they make may affect them, their families and their peers – and those decisions may be made by others when they are young. This has been an important lesson learned.

The use of film in evaluation

When the Soqotra Heritage Project was initiated in 2017, it was intended from the outset that film would be a key component of the programme. This was because it has great visual impact as well as being able to document the many facets of heritage and traditions, and to directly demonstrate those traditions in an active sense. A key feature of the programme was the training of Soqotri team members in the use of film initially to document those traditions, and also the work of the team and their interactions with the communities with which they engaged.

The use of film to measure the impact of programme activities allows a number of advantages that are difficult to achieve with more formulaic approaches and written or static reporting mechanisms:

Firstly, film can capture directly the responses – including emotional responses – of participants and stakeholders. The films in this evaluation exercise have captured this directly – not simply through interviews, but through facial expression during these events, and the interactions of both participants and audiences. If the events had not engaged and affected audiences within communities the impact would be limited to such statements as “X number of people attended the event” – but how they felt, how they engaged and responded, and how they were still engaged several years later is difficult to quantify directly without such a film-based visual approach.

Secondly, allowing participants the space to communicate their feelings and responses allows communities to take ownership not just of the event and the wider project, but of their own heritage. A number of participants have stated that prior to the events, and the films made of them, they had lost some of their engagement with their own heritage and the fact that this had been captured, discussed and evaluated enabled a level of decolonization of what could otherwise be perceived as another externally funded project where communities felt no ownership of the events that were being documented externally. Because the local team have used film to engage with communities and they can express themselves directly and visually, they have taken ownership of that engagement. This has led to the young participants – albeit mostly male participants – continuing this work independently.

The next stage of this development is moving already to outreach – while it can be expensive to run and host a heritage event which usually requires external support, the films can and have been shown in different locations on Soqotra for the cost of travel only. The next stage is to expand this to more remote communities, those that have little access to large scale events in urban areas,

and to ensure that young heritage participants are better able to use film directly for such outreach programmes and to have the resources to conduct such engagements independently.

It should also be noted that there is always specific interest by local communities and stakeholders in sharing the heritage of Soqotra more widely. It is of course easy to show films for national and international audiences, but Soqotra stakeholders have consistently argued that such outreach is best done (a) by ensuring Soqotri participants can engage with regional and global heritage communities more directly, and (b) that visitors to Soqotra should have the opportunity to engage with Soqoti cultural heritage especially as the vast majority of tourism and tourists on Soqotra have been encouraged to engage with the natural environment rather than the cultural heritage - and the people of Soqotra feel that this can be shared and enjoyed more widely. The use of film to encourage such interaction is an obvious next step.



Screening of the heritage festival film in a remote village on Soqotra

Outputs

As evaluation, impact monitoring and transition are viewed as long-term sustainable components, it was decided to establish a sustainable resource where outreach, impact and evaluation methods and outcomes can be routinely uploaded and shared. This resource is in development and a selection of evaluation content has been uploaded. It is yet to be released into the public domain as the project partners re-visit a range of participants to discuss directly with them how this can best be accomplished, and whether participants are agreeable to content being shared and under what circumstances this is acceptable.

The Soqotra Heritage Project website is currently being re-developed, and this impact resource will form a key component moving forwards. It currently features very little text, but a series of short films allows participants to tell their own stories and express themselves directly about their experiences in the heritage festivals and their values of other heritage sites and traditions.

It should be noted that currently only a small number of short interviews are included on the Soqotra Heritage Project impact website. This is because there are a number of additional interviews, but these were conducted in the Soqotri language and it is extremely time consuming to accurately translate these into both Arabic and English and to provide subtitles. As the website is designed as a long-term learning and outreach resource, additional film outputs will be added from this evaluation exercise, alongside additional films created during the initial project and also from

subsequent projects – for example a series of interviews undertaken by the Soqotra team when visiting Jordan and talking to heritage professionals there about the commonalities between the conservation of heritage in different locations and the effects that climate change has had on such programmes. As evaluation will be built more directly into the project this resource will be used to record impact, evaluation and outreach and also ensure that such resources can be easily viewed on Soqotra directly – where the internet can be intermittent and weak at best.

Additional outcomes

The CPF funded programme and its subsequent development has allowed further engagement with relevant authorities in Yemen. The establishment of a local team of heritage experts and actors on Soqotra – a team which includes the Soqotra General Manager of the General Organization for Antiquities and Museums (GOAM) – has allowed development of a more formal relationship with GOAM and the signing of a five year agreement with them. The immediate effect of this has been the visit of the Director General of GOAM to Soqotra to engage with the local team, to ensure that frequent reporting to GOAM Head Office is maintained, and for GOAM to engage directly with the Soqotra Governorate on heritage protection on the archipelago.

Given the close relationship between cultural and natural heritage on Soqotra, a working relationship with the Environmental Protection Authority (EPA) on Soqotra and in Aden is established, with plans for direct discussions between EPA and GOAM about joint conservation initiatives – which are currently better developed for biodiversity due to the availability of funds, global initiatives and the Soqotra Conservation Zoning Plan. The potential for monitoring of environmental and biodiversity programmes and their effects on local communities using film media is therefore something for potential development, using heritage impact monitoring as an example.