

## Wildlife expert:

# Palmyra's rare ibises on the verge of extinction

The five ibises still breeding in the Palmyrean desert have become famous throughout the world in the past three years, because they are the only five left in the world. Wildlife expert Dr. G. Serra told ST in a statement Saturday.

The species is listed as "Critically Endangered" by the World Conservation Union, the highest level of threat. This means that the risk of global extinction of this species in the short period is very high, expert Serra added.

Wildlife expert Serra said: "They were discovered in the framework of a UN-FAO-Ministry of Agriculture and Agrarian Reform project funded by the Italian Cooperation. A team of locals from Palmyra community, led by Italian conservation biologist Gianluca Serra, discovered the colony in March 2002, after months of exploration and questioning desert nomads and hunters. As these birds are geneti-

ery in 2002 attracted international attention to the project, and to Palmyra desert's natural heritage. The news was reported on important media outlets such as the BBC, National Geographic Channel, and in The Guardian. The

Guardian. Ecologists and naturalists nowadays visiting Syrian desert are astonished in realizing the extent of its on-going degradation. People from Al Badia all agree that this destruction process has taken place recently, during the past 15-20 years.

According to Dr. G. Serra: "The Bald Ibis is the perfect symbol of this destruction process. Only 15-20 years ago there were hundreds of pairs of ibises breeding in the desert. Many sites of Al Badia desert are still called by Bedouin nomads by the name of the bird (an-nug). Uncontrolled hunting, habitat destruction (through sheep overgrazing and fire-wood collection), collection

food, are the main causes which contributed to reducing the population of bald ibises to the present grim situation ? this year only 2 pairs breeding?.

Ibises were protected during the past 3 years by the Palmyra project through the involvement of nomads from Amur tribe. Despite these efforts, one adult individual was shot down last year by foreign hunters. Another big problem is that these birds are migratory, and spent half of the year most probably outside Syria (possibly in Yemen or Eastern Africa).

During an international conservation meeting held in Madrid last January, experts agreed that the most urgent conservation single action to save this small invaluable colony is to tag 1 bird or 2 with satellite transmitters, to detect their migratory route and their wintering grounds. In fact, every summer the ibis chicks leave Palmyra with their parents but do not

for unknown reasons. It is thus of paramount importance to detect the wintering grounds to protect the birds also there. Otherwise the colony could disappear soon may be - even this year!

This spring everything was finally ready for the satellite tagging operation. Several UN agencies and NGOs extended a helping hand to this effect. One of the European most re-known expert in the field was hired for the purpose, Dr. Lubomir Peske from Czech Republic. Dr. Peske said: "Saving the Syrian

bald ibises is an important goal not only in the benefit of the Syrian natural heritage, but also in the interest of the global biodiversity" Mr Serra also added: "It is also an important occasion for the local community of Palmyrean desert as it could easily foster the ecotourism and birdwatching in the near future, and attract international funds for socio-economic devel-



occasion to raise a much needed awareness of the Syrian public, and especially that of new generations, relatively to the need to protect their own heritage of nature?.

In response to a question on how he could spend four years uninterruptedly in Palmyra far from his parents and friends, Mr Serra answered: "In this period of

engaged in pursuing the dream of attempting to save what remains of Syria desert nature, by convincing the local community that this is in the benefit of their children - "I am working for your children", I have been repeatedly saying to the people of Palmyra. Not much time is left to save something valuable".

Unfortunately, few weeks



ago soon after the arrival of Dr. Peske, the whole satellite tagging operation came to a halt for different problems. The two experts and the team of Palmyrean locals have waited helpless for almost 4 weeks, but the authorization from concerned authorities finally did not materialized. Birds meanwhile left their nests days ago and the operation could not be carried out.

"The reasons for this halt are not clear to me. But it is very clear that a big opportunity for the Palmyrean people, and for the future generations was wasted. This was probably the last year that the ibises will return", in the words of Dr. Peske. Nobody knows if they will be back next year!"

By: Maysa Wassouf