



# CHAMPION OF THE EARTH

*It's 100 years since the founding father of the UAE was born. During this centenary year, we reflect on Sheikh Zayed's extraordinary environmental legacy.*

The late Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan, founding father of the UAE, was an environmentalist long before such a term became a buzzword. A keen falconer, he loved nature and wildlife and adopted conservationists' values as a matter of conviction and necessity. Such was his dedication that in 2005, one year after his passing, the United Nations Environment Programme honoured Sheikh Zayed posthumously with the 'Champion of the Earth' award for his outstanding wildlife conservation efforts both inside the UAE and around the world, as well as his efforts in agriculture, forestation and preserving biodiversity.

It was one of many global accolades Sheikh Zayed received in recognition of his tireless work to protect the environment. Others include the Environment and Development Award, FAO Award for Agricultural Development, and the WWF Golden Panda Award – the first time in the award's history that it had been bestowed on a head of state.

"We cherish our environment because it is an integral part of our country, our history and our heritage. On land and in the sea, our forefathers lived and survived in this environment. >



**Above:** While only a small part of those held in the National Archives, these images, preserved for future generations, capture something of the character of the man most know simply as the Father of the Nation.

They were able to do so because they recognised the need to preserve it for succeeding generations,” Sheikh Zayed once said. “With God’s will, we shall continue to work to protect our environment and our wildlife, as did our forefathers before us. It is a duty, and, if we fail, our children, rightly, will reproach us for squandering an essential part of their inheritance and our heritage.”

Sheikh Zayed played a pivotal role in saving the Arabian Oryx from extinction, set up several falcon breeding programmes and encouraged the use of captive-bred birds in falconry to reduce pressure on wild stock, and established protected areas for wildlife. Today, there are 19 terrestrial and marine protected areas in Abu Dhabi under the Sheikh Zayed Protected Areas Network.

When the UAE was formed, Sheikh Zayed quickly designated the island of Sir Bani Yas as a nature reserve and initiated his ‘Greening the Desert’ programme. He formed official institutions such as the Federal Environment Agency and Abu Dhabi’s Environmental Research



and Wildlife Development Agency, the later of which morphed into the Environment Agency – Abu Dhabi.

Writing in the agency’s ‘State of Environment Report 2017’, His Excellency Mohammed Ahmed Al Bowardi, Minister of State for Defence Affairs and Managing Director of the Environment Agency – Abu Dhabi, wrote: “There is a growing global movement towards environmental protection and preservation. Many governments, corporations and citizens are actively pursuing and reaping the benefits of a green growth





strategy, striving not only to limit the anthropological impacts of our continued development but, where possible, to reverse the trends of environmental degradation. The leadership of Abu Dhabi and the federal government of the United Arab Emirates are determined to be leaders and not followers in environmental stewardship.”

Today, Sheikh Zayed’s legacy of environmental stewardship is remembered and honoured in a variety of ways throughout the UAE, from the creation of a new nature reserves in Dubai’s Marmoom Desert Conservation Reserve to billion-dollar investment in clean and renewable energy. The environment is also one of the six pillars of the UAE’s Vision 2021, and central to the UAE Green Agenda 2030, the National Climate Change Plan and the Zayed Sustainability Prize.

Speaking on the UAE’s 21st National Environment Day, held on February 4 this year, His Excellency Dr Thani bin Ahmed Al Zeyoudi, UAE Minister of Climate Change and Environment, said: “Celebrating the National Environment Day in the Year of Zayed adds considerable value to the occasion. The visionary leader and founding father of the UAE always considered the environment part and parcel of his philosophy and day-to-day practices. Sustaining the environment for generations to come was among the top priorities in his endeavors to build the country, paving the way for the country’s sustainable development.”

A tribute to Sheikh Zayed by the Environment Agency – Abu Dhabi describes him as “one of the world’s greatest conservationists”. It reads: “His foresight and vision long preceded the present-day global conservationists’ movement. Zayed lived and died with the values of conservation at his heart. His is a story almost unparalleled anywhere in the world.” 🌱

## WORDS OF WISDOM

TO QUOTE SHEIKH ZAYED BIN SULTAN AL NAHYAN:

*“The desert environment has taught us to be patient until the land blossoms, bestowing its bounties on us. Thus, we have to be fortitudinous, supporting our odyssey of development and progression to achieve the aspirations of our people.”*

*“We have worked, since the establishment of our state, to protect the environment and wildlife. These achievements should be an incentive for us, particularly the Emirati youth, the future generation, to continue taking care of and keeping the environment safe and clean because if we don’t, we shall destroy the resources that Allah blessed us with; these resources are not ours alone, they also belong to our children and their children.”*

*“We pay the utmost care and attention to our environment for it is an integral part of our country, our history and our heritage. Our forefathers and our ancestors lived in this land and coexisted with its environment, on land and at sea, and instinctively realized the need to preserve it.”*

*“They used to say that agriculture has no future [in the UAE]. But with God’s blessing and our determination, we have succeeded in transforming this desert into a green land.”*

(Source: *Father of our Nation: Collected Quotes of Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan*, published by Books Arabia)