TOURISM for TOMORROW Awards

CONSERVATION AWARD WINNER 2010

Emirates Hotel & Resorts (EH&R) is part of the Emirates Group, widely known for its Dubai-based international airline. Its first project, Al Maha Desert Resort, was a pioneering desert ecolodge.

CASE STUDY

It led to the creation of the first-ever protected conservation area in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), the Dubai Desert Conservation Reserve, in 2004.

The unique characteristics of both the cultural heritage and the natural environment of the UAE have influenced the evolution of Al Maha to become a best-practice leader in: the rehabilitation and protection of a formerly degraded natural habitat; the reintroduction of rare and endangered species into the area; and the safeguarding of cultural heritage through the largest private collection in the region of Bedouin artefacts. Activities offered at the resort help to continue the traditions of Bedouin culture such as falconry, camel riding, and knowledge of traditional plant uses and desert lore.

At Al Maha, there is also subtle but effective education of staff, guests and local people about the sustainable practices, including environmentally sensitive design, water conservation, and protection of desert flora and fauna. The sustainable tourism success in the desert environment close to

the bustling city of Dubai led the group to launch, in 2009, its second project, Wolgan Valley Resort & Spa in Australia. Located within a 4,000-acre wildlife reserve created by Emirates, and bordered by the Blue Mountains World Heritage Area, Wolgan Valley Resort & Spa connects, for the first time, two National Parks in New South Wales. A third project is also planned for Cap Ternay in the Seychelles Islands.

In all its properties, EH&R has undertaken significant habitat replenishment and rehabilitation efforts which have significantly contributed to its conservation success. Its goal is to create a working model for conservation tourism linked to a successful business for discerning travellers. With the development of master plans for conservation at its resorts, it has made a significant commitment to the long-term success of its sustainable tourism endeavours.

At Al Maha, the desert area had been significantly degraded by the presence of camel farms and additional grazing by feral camels. To revitalise the habitat, Al Maha planted over 6,000 trees and grasses, accompanied by removal of invasive and non-native species, leading to the re-establishment of indigenous vegetation. Following the revitalising of the habitat, native wildlife were re-introduced into the reserve, including the Arabian Oryx, an endangered species which was locally extinct in the wild. With support, the original 102 released individuals now number over 300 as the native vegetation continues to recover. Scientific research conducted by outside organisations such as UNEP and IUCN help to monitor the progress of the Oryx rehabilitation efforts.

CASE STUDY

In Wolgan Valley, a similar effort is underway to restore the habitat of an area that has long been devoted to cattle ranching and to re-connect two national parks with an important wildlife corridor for migrating species. In addition, feral animal populations have had a significant impact on Australia's bio-diversity, and substantial efforts are being made by EH&R to create feral-free zones that will allow for the re-introduction of rare and locally extinct species, such as several members of the wallaby family that have long been absent from the environment surrounding the resort. Historical records of wildlife observations in Wolgan Valley, including those by Charles Darwin in 1836, are helping to inform EH&R's plan for species re-introduction and habitat rehabilitation.

Close monitoring of feral eradication efforts will signal the timing of these sensitive re-introductions. Wolgan Valley has set a new standard for successful conservation through tourism in Australia.

In addition to natural heritage conservation, EH&R has worked hard to protect the cultural heritage of the area. At Wolgan Valley, both settler and aboriginal culture are preserved and celebrated, with guest events and activities focused on learning about both the traditional aboriginal history of the area, as well as the history of the settlers. The original settler farmhouse has been restored, along with its vegetable gardens and fruit orchards, and is used as a 'living' museum. Several Aboriginal archaeological sites have also been located and preserved intact on the property, forming the basis of several guest activities focused on learning about Aboriginal culture.

EH&R is also committed to reducing the environmental footprint of its resorts. It has embraced environmentally sensitive engineering in the design of its resort facilities, using solar power, water recycling and waste recycling wherever possible. Wolgan Valley has been internationally accredited as carbon neutral.

Through its significant dedication to the conservation and rehabilitation of the areas where it develops its tourism facilities, EH&R has demonstrated a pioneering and successful model for large-scale impact on areas of natural heritage significance, and its holistic approach to its conservation efforts has embraced both the natural habitats where it works, and the cultural heritage of these areas as well.