

# *The Island of* **Abu Al Abyad**



This book is about the natural history of Abu Al Abyad. It attempts, for the first time, to present a comprehensive picture of one of the largest islands in the United Arab Emirates. Compiled from the contributions of various experts it paints a fascinating picture of the island. The six chapters include accounts of:

- **Geology** - how the geology and other factors that have helped to shape the island.
- **Archaeology** - catalogues the richness of archaeological finds that bear witness to the long occupation of the island by man.
- **Marine Environment** - the marine environment and the plants and animals to be found around Abu Al Abyad; as well as a description of the mariculture industry on the island.
- **Mammals** - some of the larger terrestrial mammals that can be seen on the island.
- **Birds** - detailed coverage of the rich avifauna on the island.
- **Vegetation** - how factors such as soil and climate that influence the vegetation of the island.

This book draws together information from a wide variety of source and is illustrated with numerous maps and colour photographs. This book provides a detailed yet very readable account of the natural history of the island of Abu Al Abyad.



**Environmental Research & Wildlife Development Agency**  
United Arab Emirates - Abu Dhabi

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## Introduction



This book is about the natural history of Abu Al Abyad. It attempts, for the first time, to present a comprehensive picture of one of the largest islands in the United Arab Emirates, that of Abu Al Abyad. Compiled from the contributions of various experts it paints a fascinating picture of a quite fascinating island.

There are more than a hundred islands within the territorial waters of the United Arab Emirates. Abu Al Abyad, located at latitude 24°12 north and longitude 53°46 east is one of the largest, covering some 476 km<sup>2</sup>, and lies 3 km offshore, 125 km west of the city of Abu Dhabi.

Abu Al Abyad, like many other offshore islands of the Arabian Gulf, is a barrier island, with shallow sheltered waters between it and the mainland. Abu Al Abyad lies within the southeast corner of Marawah Marine Protected Area, which covers an area of 5,561 km<sup>2</sup>. The presence of coral reefs and

extensive sea grass beds adds to the diversity of marine life surrounding the island, supporting a wide array of fish species and providing important habitat for the endangered hawksbill turtles and dugongs.

In the past, Abu Al Abyad was used extensively as a base for the pearl industry, the rich legacy of artefacts bears witness to this. The earliest clearly recognisable historical references to Abu Al Abyad dates to the 1820s, although it is believed that Abu Al Abyad was probably continuously occupied, perhaps seasonally, throughout the last 7,000 years all the way up through the last 300-400 years, when it was a centre of the pearl fishing industry. Today the links with the sea remain just as strong with a thriving mariculture industry on the island.

The low lying topography of the island, interspersed with a few scattered small hills, rises to

about 50 metres in the centre of the island. The island is covered with a mosaic of sabkha (inland or coastal saline flats) mingled with stony gravel and sandy deserts, fringed by a narrow strip of mud and marine sand covered mostly with mangrove plantations that border much of the island.

Abu Al Abyad Island has an arid desert climate that is characterised by low rainfall and high temperatures and a prolonged dry and hot summer. Because of the arid climate, the saline soils are nutrient poor, and high evaporation rates limit water availability for plant growth. The vegetation on Abu Al Abyad is therefore generally sparse but well adapted to these harsh conditions.

Of the native mammals to be found on the island the Arabian Oryx is by far the most spectacular, populations such as those currently found on Abu Al Abyad represent one of the best hopes for re-introduction of these magnificent animals to the