

Qeshm Island, Iran: Community-led conservation and ecotourism

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Key Messages

- The people of Qeshm Island have a strong connection to the land and sea. This connection, and sense of environmental belonging have encouraged them to actively participate in community conservation.
- Qeshm Island is home to sacred sites and species which can provide a foundation for community-based conservation areas.

Ecotourism offers economic, ecological and conservational benefits to the residents of Qeshm Island, while being respectful to the local culture and new forms of livelihood.

Community Profile

Qeshm Island (Figure 19) is the largest island in the Persian Gulf, Southern Iran – about 130 km long and 11–35 km wide (Karami et al., 2018; UNESCO, n.d.). The weather is hot and humid with mild and short winters. In 2016, the total population was 148,993.

In 2017, Qeshm Island was declared a UNESCO Global Geopark (a geographical area where sites and landscapes are of international geological significance). Notably, the island includes Qeshm County, on the eastern part of the island, and the Hara Protected Area, on the north coast (UNESCO, n.d.).

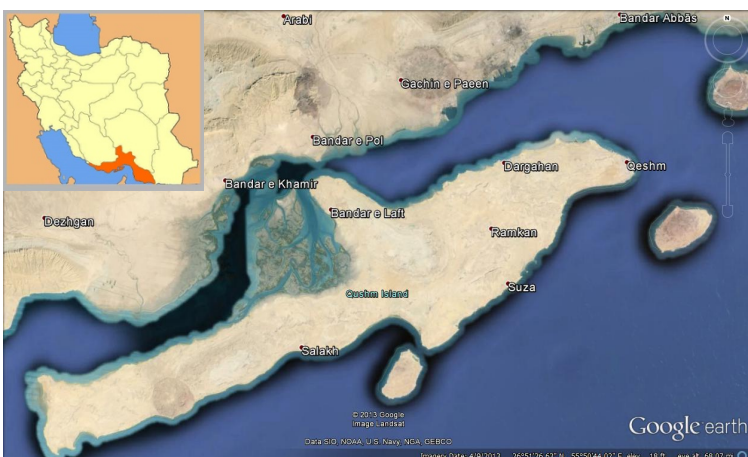


Figure 1: Map of Iran and Qeshm Island

Qeshm Island is well known due to the region's historical background, customs, traditional clothes, fishing, festivals, sacred sites and ecotourism attractions, such as mangrove forests, turtle hatcheries, coral reefs, coastal diversity, marine mammals and attractive geographical phenomena (Qeshm Free Area Organization, 2013; Duchaine et al., 2010). The main sources of income for the people on Qeshm Island are fishing and maritime trade (Duchaine et al., 2010).

Conservation and Livelihood Challenges

Local communities on Qeshm Island face numerous threats and obstacles to sustainable development, including lack of recognition, inappropriate tourism, climate change, acculturation (influx of non-native people for trade and visiting), inappropriate development, illegitimate jobs (smuggling clothes and foods), overfishing, pollution, capacity for oil/gas/ mineral exploration, habitat reduction, hot weather, limited fresh water resources and lack of appropriate infrastructure.



Two decades after development grew on Qeshm Island, the local people have shown resilience to detrimental change and increased their efforts to keep traditions alive, conserve the environment and build the economy in a way that fits with local values. The local communities reflect a sense of belonging, livelihood needs and spiritual and social values in their involvement with conservation, and in learning how to develop tourism based on their natural attractions and their culture (Qeshm Free Area Organization, 2013).

Culture

Communities are working to maintain or restore various cultural activities. Among them are the following three examples drawn from Ghayoumi (2014):

1. In Salakh village, in the south of the island, as well as other communities, celebrations of the Fisherman's Norooz (Norooz-e Sayyad) – a 'new year' for the fishery – take place in late July. On this day, people do not fish or consume seafood, believing that the aquatic resources need a break for reproduction. They swim in the sea, in order to be fresh and healthy until the next Fisherman's Norooz. In the festival, people wear new clothes, prepare many types of traditional foods, and engage in traditional drumming, dance and plays (Amani, 2013; Moormogoui et al., 2013).
2. Various tree species are considered sacred by the local people. One of these is the fig tree (loor or *lool*, its local name), large trees that are respected particularly as a result of the shade they provide, important in hot weather. Fig trees have a deep connection to Indigenous life and culture, with some even having their own individual names, and some being considered 'wish trees' as people believe their wishes will be granted by the tree (Fallahatabar, 2017).



Figure 2: Tela sacred wells in Laft Historical Port, Qeshm Island

Photo: Razieh Ghayoumi

3. Tela wells (in the historical port of Laft) are sacred to the local people. The wells are ancient but their age is unknown. There were once 366 wells, each with a specific name. However, due to storms and earthquakes in recent years, the number of wells has been reduced to around 100 (Dashtizadeh, 2012; Dashtizadeh et al., 2013; Negahban & Jamadi, 2012).
4. In the past, methods for efficient water use were extremely important, as was the sustainable use of natural resources. A female water guardian, or water master known as a *Mirab*, carried out traditional water management (Dashtizadeh, 2012). Due to climate change, decreases in water resources and cultural changes in water use, as well as the modernisation of lifestyles and consumption patterns, local people use these wells much less than before.

Conservation

Local residents of Qeshm Island voluntarily participate in conservation programmes such as sea turtle (Hawksbill) conservation (Hawksbill). In Shibderaz Village, in collaboration with the village council and Qeshm Free Zone Organization, around 25 km of the south coast has been declared a turtle breeding and hatchery area.

During the nesting and hatchery season, local people educate the public, patrol beaches, tag turtles, collect eggs, transfer eggs to special safe sites and guard the eggs (see photo). Women make different kinds of handicrafts with the sign of the sea turtle. They also have ecotourism activities to introduce their village and turtle conservation programme to tourists (UNDP/GEF/SGP, 2003).

The appreciation for the benefits of conservation has led to local interest in building a community-based marine and coastal conservation area on Qeshm Island, before development makes a greater impact. This protected area could be developed in a manner that draws on the successful models practiced in other countries, such as Australia, and incorporates research, monitoring and education (Smyth, 2008). In any case, the model used should be localised to fit the needs and aspirations of the Qeshm Island community. Mechanisms, such as Indigenous marine resource use, monitoring, research and education, could be used to help manage areas of interest, since there is recognition of the value of a mixture of techniques and conservation approaches.

Such an initiative will create more opportunities for the local people to become involved with conservation and tourism activities. In this regard, governmental and non-governmental organisations (NGOs), universities and research institutes could benefit from the support of the island community to develop local capabilities, and should provide assistance to establish a community-based marine conservation area through community involvement, networking, workshops, training activities and research.



Figure 3: A water reservoir in Laft Historical Port, Qeshm Island

Photo: Razieh Ghayoumi

Practical Outcomes

Qeshm Island, as a special place of biodiversity and history, has many tourist attractions specific to the island's features, such as the traditional architecture called louvers, which are particularly prevalent in the historical port of Laft. Water reservoirs spread out everywhere on the island and dhow (fishing boat) building and traditional dance and folk music are part of the traditions of the local residents (Qeshm Free Area Organization, 2013; Dashtizadeh et al., 2013; Negahban & Jamadi, 2012).



Figure 4: Setting up a safe place for turtle egg hatching and monitoring in Shibderaz village, Qeshm Island

Photo: Razieh Ghayoumi

Communities lead various ecotourism activities, including tours to see dolphins, mangrove forests, turtle nesting sites, coral reefs, nature attractions, natural sacred sites, historical tours and scuba diving. Tourists can also purchase handicrafts and enjoy local food cooked in a community member's home (Qeshm Free Area Organization, 2013). Such activities have provided economic, social and environmental benefits to the community, including job creation and reduction of the rate of emigration. It seems that the increase in forms of ecotourism that focus on community traditions and natural attractions has provided Qeshm Island residents with the opportunity to preserve and maintain their culture and natural resources, notably the traditional practices that are, on Qeshm Island, often associated with conservation and sustainable use of natural resources.

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Acknowledgements



Community Conservation
Research Network

This report was produced by the Community Conservation Research Network (CCRN), a global partnership of Indigenous, academic, community, governmental and non-governmental partners. It contributes to a larger body of work which focuses on the linkages of environmental stewardship and sustainable livelihoods at a local community level. The CCRN is grateful for the support of Saint Mary's University, Canada, and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC).

Our website is home to community stories from around the globe, short documentaries and our book:

'Communities, Conservation and Livelihoods'

www.communityconservation.net

