

Socotra

سُقُطْرَى *Suqutṛā*

Island of the dragon's blood



Expedition report

From the Yemeni fairytale island
SOCOTRA 2019

by Carlos Zanutelli, Nov. 2022

Sokotra – Island of the dragon's blood

Portrait Socotra

Socotra the fairytale island - 2019





Socotra – map

- Since Homer times (2800 years ago) fairy tales, mystical dragon island
- Known in the Middle Ages for the best quality of incense and dragon's blood (medicine, color).
- Since 2005 UNESCO – World Heritage (Biosphere Reserve)
- Belongs to YEMEN, where war has been raging for years, effectively controlled by the UAE militarily and politically since the intervention of the UAE in April 2018.



Socotra – capital city HADIBO

- Main island 3625 km², 42,000 inhabitants
- UAE Emiratis are buying up the country, locals are losing control of their island
- The counterpart to Galapagos - because of endemic flora & fauna
- Badly damaged twice by two cyclones in recent years
- The biotopes are under severe threat due to the semi-free living goats and the growing human population



Sokotra – Island of the dragon's blood

Travelogue

Zurich Kloten – Istanbul – Kairo – SEYOUN – Socotra



Trip almost ended prematurely here at Istanbul Airport because of nails and fishing wire in my survival kit.



Airport SEYOUN (JEMEN mainland)



14:30 2 St. 55 Min. 19:25
ZRH Direkt IST



07:55 2 St. 15 Min. 09:10
IST Direkt CAI

Yemenia

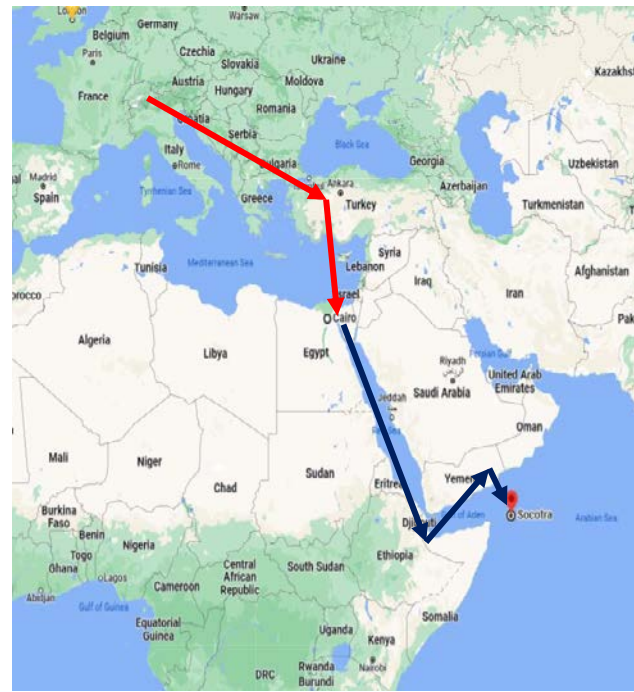
Cairo (02.00am) – Seiyun or Aden – Socotra (8.45am)



Great news:

**Direct flights of
Emirates & Air
Arabia**

**ABU DHABI –
SOKOTRA (2H)**
(Jemen flights canceled)



Airport SOCOTRA



Traditional Socotra dinner

- Expedition Colleagues
- with local companions over a somewhat rustic but tasty meal - fish and rice, salad of local tomatoes and limes





Our flophouses - soon moved
me to the neighboring 4*
Summer Land Hotel from/resp.
check in



Having trust in other people is a very important quality.

... the barber was an excellent master of his craft.



If sick or injured:
on Socotra there is a very good
sick care...
(Hospital Sheikh Khalifa) thanks
to the neighboring countries
interested in the island (however).







Sokotra – Island of the dragon's blood

**Mysterious,
magical plant world**



Dragon blood tree

/Dracaena cinnabari



- Symbol of Socotra
- Strange appearance with an umbrella-like shape
- Looks like a heavily packed crown
- Water reservoir, can release x times more water into the soil through the air than the local environment can store in rainwater.
- Trees are 100 years old, difficult to estimate, no rings



Challenges

- Climatic changes, less and less water can be stored because the sea is getting warmer and temperatures are rising. (cyclone 2015 destroyed 1/3 of all trees)
- Goats (4 goats for every 1 Bedouin / farmer) which eat the young offspring.
- Out of 60-100 *Dracaena* species, *D. cinnabari* is one of only six species that grow into a tree.
- Growing population, tourists, logging, overgrazing are putting pressure on the vegetation
- Drying out of the archipelago, reducing habitat by 45% since 2008
- Collecting the resin, wood for beehives.

Spread

- The tree blooms in March, the flowers grow at the end of the branches, maturing 5 mo
- Its fruits are fleshy berries containing 1-4 seeds. Change color from green to black, resp. Orange when ripe.
- The berries are eaten by the birds and this is how the seeds are then distributed. The berries also exude a deep red resin, dragon's blood.

Dragon blood tree/*Dracaena cinnabari*

- Name comes from red liquid that looks like dragon blood
- Sap naturally oozes from cracks and wounds in the bark.
- Liquid has several functions
- for medical use antiseptic treatment of tumors, cell healing, stimulant, toothpaste
- Dye for pottery, wool, lipstick
- (in 18th century lacquer for violin makers)



Fairy tales, myths

- In Arabic the tree is called Dam al-Akhawain resp. "The blood of the two brothers"
- Folklore has it that the first of these trees grew at the site of the two brothers, Darsa & Samha, who fought to the death.
- Another tradition from India says, that the tree a drop of blood of a dragon arose while fighting an elephant, bit the elephant behind the ear (where the trunk couldn't reach) , sucked out all the blood then the elephant fell on the dragon, crushed him and it was gone for both of them.
- Today is the plateau Firmhin/Diksam half forest, half dragon graveyard.





Boswellia Incense tree

- The origin of Frankincense, frankincense is the dried wound sap of the tree.
- Incense was a very valuable commodity in the Middle Ages and was the most important product exported and traded from Socotra by the natives.





Myrrh

(Commiphora)



Aloe

jawiyon/
socotrine

Socotra myrrh is the queen of all myrrh species.
The scent is unique. Medicine: Anti-inflammatory, antibacterial.
One of the most important medicinal plants on the island.
Powdered resin administered in warm milk/water to children with stomach pain.
It has a reddish-brown luminous appearance, resembling a transparent carnelian (gemstone).

Aloe juice is a remedy for hemorrhoids and intestinal disorders.

Among the 100 different types of aloe, the one in Socotra is said to have effective healing properties.



Gurkenbaum

Dendrosicyos socotranus

Bilimbi



- Endemic species
- Because of giant growth and bottle-like Shape will give him a strange and said to have a peculiar appearance
- Also known as the bottle tree because of the cylindrical and swollen trunk
- Smooth, solid trunks and exceptionally few hanging branches.
- Usually about one meter wide and two meters long
- Heart-shaped leaves, thick, rough surface surrounded by tiny spines.
- Flowers are yellow
- The plant can be used medicinally to treat conditions such as diabetes, urinary tract problems and liver problems
- Useful for ornamental and nutritional purposes.



Acacia tree (Acacia sp.)

Few plants have found their way to Socotra from other parts of the world.

Here the genus Acacia, often to be found in the Horn of Africa, as well as in Arabia.

Roots drive up to 40m into the ground to reach deep groundwater layers.

The tree grows very slowly, hard wood, very popular as firewood, burns long and hot.

Desert rose (Adenium)

- Stem succulent almost evergreen plants
- Grow as shrubs and form thickened stems (caudex).
- Grows strangely enough to cling to rocks.
- Reach growth heights of up to 5 meters and a trunk diameter of up to 2 meters
- Grow slowly and can live for several hundred years
- The leaves are spirally arranged and clustered at the end of the shoot, are leathery, undivided and about 5-15 cm long.
- The flowers sit on terminal inflorescences.
- Because of the thicker, bulbous trunk, it can store much more water than its conspecifics on the Arabian mainland.
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- In its native regions, the plant sap is used as a component for the production of arrow poisons but also medicinal medicine.



Sokotra – Island of the dragon's blood

Wildlife

The Socotra chameleon

- Endemic to the island of Socotra
- Of mystical origin: not closely related to any chameleon of the surrounding regions (Arabia and Horn of Africa)
- It is the largest terrestrial vertebrate on the island





- Interaction with the chameleons and the locals is always very interesting...
- ... the winner:
I released a SWATCH Automatic IRONY for the first chameleon found.

(certainly more environmentally friendly than its battery-casio)



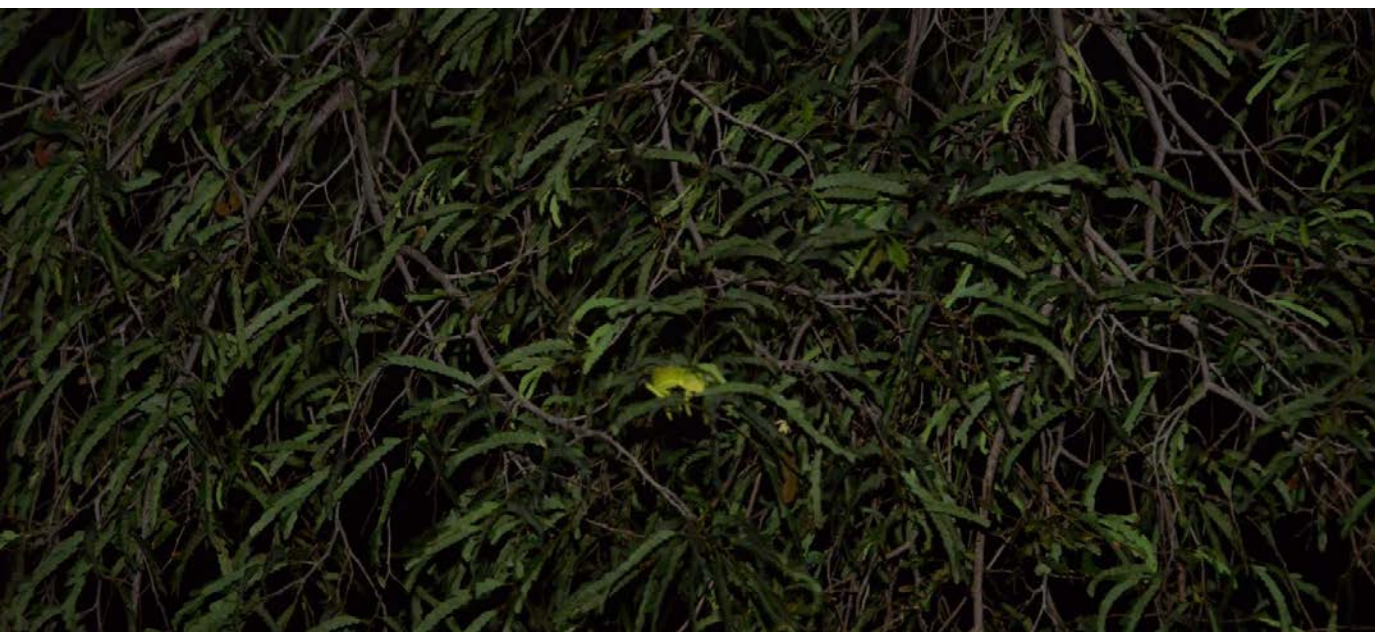
The chameleons are:

just beautiful

very interesting

fascinating !







The Socotran Vulture

- the largest bird on Socotra
- Egyptian vulture majestic form with orange coloring
- Common all over the island
- Not shy
- Plays an important role in waste mining, disposers, carcass recycler



The Socotran Double Sneak

Pachycalamus brevis

- One of the highlights of the expedition
- The double worms, which burrow in the ground and live very hidden, were found and documented with photos
- Legless lizards



The most poisonous animals on the island are:

- The invertebrate scorpions
- Centipede
- ...but none of them are dangerous to humans





Haemodracon riebeckii

- on Socotra, the largest gecko
- the entire genus is only represented on the island of Socotra with two species



Pristurus obsti

- One of the rarest species of geckos in the world
- Inhabits remains of mangroves and tamarisks in the east of the island of Socotra
- Was only discovered and described a few years ago



Sokotranische Haustiere

- Camel
- Cow
- Goat
- Sheep
- Donkey



The Socotran Goat

- on Socotra, the largest population of pets
- They live semi-wild
- Blessings to the locals for meat and milk
- The island's memento for eating away vegetation, including young dragon trees, that cannot grow back



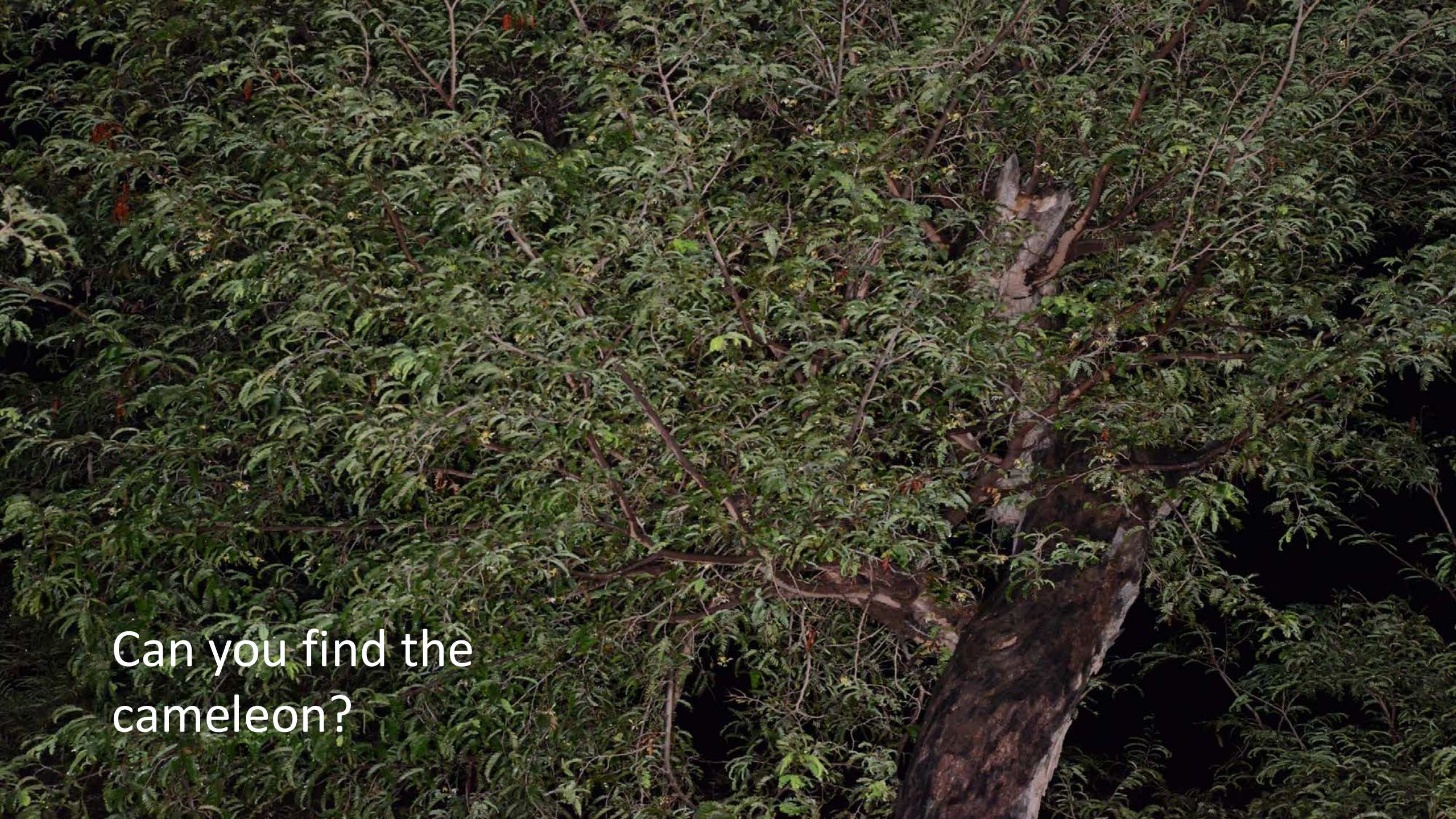
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Landscape and impressions









Can you find the
cameleon?





The island played a special role during the Cold War. The Democratic People's Republic of Yemen (South Yemen), which has been independent since 1967 and has been friends with the Eastern Bloc, declared the island a military restricted area for strategic reasons.

Soviet warships conducted an amphibious landing maneuver on Socotra in May 1980, and two squadrons of Soviet Sukhoi bombers were stationed there.

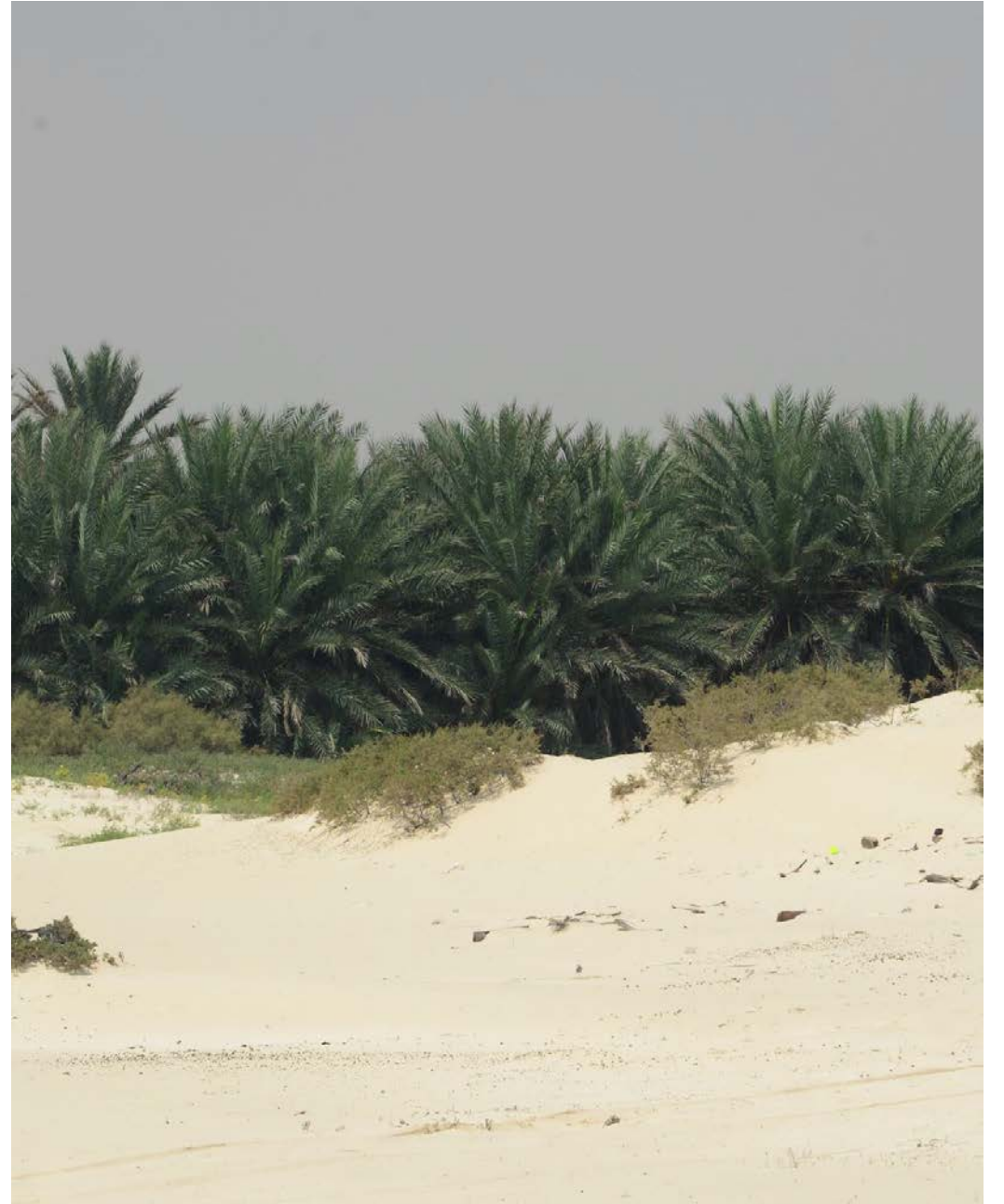














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[https://www.chameleons.info/en/
PETR NECAS](https://www.chameleons.info/en/PETR_NECAS)

*18.11.1969 in the Czech Republic
Herpetologist with a deep love and great
passion for chameleons. He spent 30 years
traveling through Europe, Africa (Madagascar),
the Arabian Peninsula, India, and the USA to
study chameleons in their natural habitat
and in captivity.



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Thank you for your attention.

Carlos Zanutelli