

Desert Art in Danger at Egypt's New Tourism Frontier

A rising tide of travellers seeking out the new frontier of Egyptian tourism is threatening priceless rock art preserved for millennia in one of the most-isolated reaches of the Sahara, writes Charles Onians from Cairo.

In Egypt's southwest corner, straddling the borders of Sudan and Libya, the elegant paintings of prehistoric man and beast in the mountains of Gilf Kabir and Jebel Ouenat are as stunning in their simplicity as anything by Picasso.

But lying 500 kilometres from the nearest habitation, the desert offers little sanctuary for these masterpieces and any effective protected designation first requires a deal between the three sometimes-quarrelsome nations.

Elegant paintings of prehistoric man threatened by actions of travelers in Egypt, Libya, Sudan

Jebel Ouenat ("Mountain of the springs") is a natural and cultural heritage site located at the border among Egypt, Libya and Sudan, which was discovered by the Egyptian explorer Ahmed Hassanein Bey only in 1923.

This spectacular mountain, together with the neighbouring Jebel Arkenu, in Libya, and Jebel Kissu in Sudan, is the result of the interaction between an ancient plate-tectonic movement and locally stable "hot spots" persistent for tens of millions of years, emerging abruptly from the vast plains of the Eastern Sahara up to 2000 metres above the sea level.

The area of these three mountains has a great ecologic value (including endangered species such as the Barbary Sheep) as well as cultural significance. Thousands of rock art sites of different styles and themes are distributed all over

the area, witnessing to the development of early pastoralism in Africa and exchanges among different ethnic groups across the Sahara.

Not only the rock art is at stake, but the region's entire cultural and natural her-

itage.

Dr Rudolph Kuper, a German archaeologist involved in trying to protect the art, mostly dating from when the desert was a receding prairie 5,000-7,000 years ago says that one cannot estimate the amount of damage done.

"People put water or oil on the paintings to make the faded colours look brighter, causing irreparable damage," he says.

The story is even more tragic just across the Egyptian border in Libya, where the delicate brush strokes of human figures at Ain Dua appear largely damaged.

Travellers drive through the desert to reach Gilf Kabir, site of the Cave of the Swimmers made famous by the 1996 film "The English Patient."

While only a handful came here in the 1980s, the numbers have been rising steadily through the 1990s as some of the millions of tourists visiting Egypt seek out something more exotic than the sandy beach of a Red Sea resort.

"By 2006 there were probably 800 people coming and this year we expect more than 1,000,"

says Kuper. Rock art specialist Tilman Lenssen-Erz says that in prehistoric times the sites would have been known for thousands of square kilometers.



says Kuper.

He adds, that, "This was a place so highly charged with symbolism and with the world views that were fixed there in the rock art that it would have been like a huge cathedral in a European context."

"People from far away would know about the significance of the religious power that is collected in this place ... where the supernatural powers of the world were fixed on rocks making the whole area a sacred landscape."

Even more recent artifacts like the world's westernmost example of ancient hieroglyphics known as Meri's rock, to the northeast of Gilf Kabir, have not gone unscathed by the passage of modern man.

The hieroglyphs are evidence that, contrary to the idea that pharaonic trade with sub-Saharan Africa only went via the Nile Valley, the ancients had a major trading route cutting straight through the desert.

Last year, someone embellished the ancient writings with a giant engraving of a topless woman.

A recent, undated composite image using a contemporary photo (background) and one from 50 years ago (foreground), shows irreparable degradation and apparent bullet damage on prehistoric rock paintings at Ain Dua in the desert at Gilf Kabir, 600 kilometres south west of Cairo.

"You can't put barbed wire around it so we developed the idea of mental fences," Kuper says of the importance of educating guides and tourists alike.

Saad Ali, a young tour operator based in the oasis of Farafra who also runs the Farafra Development Institution NGO, also realised that the only long-term solution was through education.

"We always arranged trips to clean up the desert and every year we found more rubbish so we found the solution is to train the guides," he says.

"Now it's changed a lot. Last year we went to clean up and we collected only 4.5 tones of rubbish while the year before it was 11 tones."

His next target is tour operators working out of Cairo, who are still largely unaware of the damage they wreak.

Kuper says that such programmes help to manage some 70-80 percent of people, but that others - tourists still living with a colonial mentality and Cairo-based expats who take away artifacts in their 4x4s - are difficult to control.

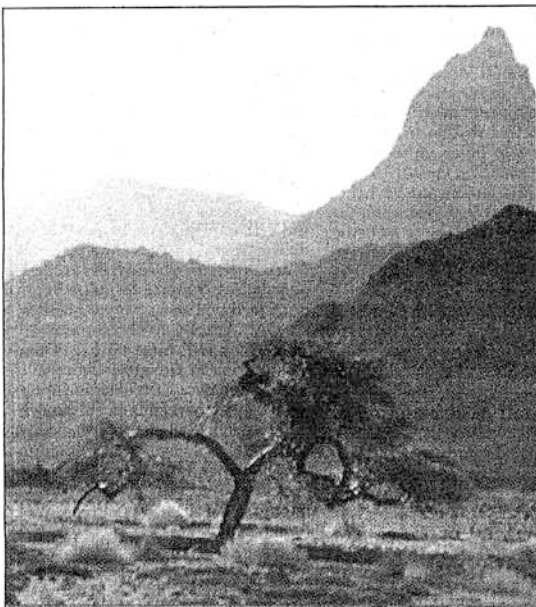
With untold damage already wrought, getting Egypt, Libya and Sudan to agree on policing the militarily sensitive area is a conservation conundrum.

The hope is to have the area designated as a trans-boundary cultural landscape UNESCO World Heritage site, but that requires the three nations to all first declare individual national parks.

So far, only Egypt has designated a park, but officials from all three countries are due to meet in Cairo in December in the hope of hammering out a deal.

Kuper and Prof Mustafa Fouda from the Egyptian Environmental Affairs Agency want to build a museum-cum-educational centre in the oasis of Dakhla, the jumping off point for most trips to Gilf Kabir.

"Hopefully we can make our dreams come true, with a museum to explain the relationship between man and the desert, to explain how man can make use of the resources in a sustainable way," says Fouda.



ABOVE: Jebel Ouenat: a natural and cultural heritage site located at the border among Egypt, Libya and Sudan. RIGHT: Gilf Kabir: like Jebel Ouenat, both are as stunning in their simplicity as anything by the Spanish painter Picasso.

