

## Foreword

UNESCO began sounding alarm over the need for sustainable development in 1968 by organizing a groundbreaking conference questioning our unbridled exploitation of nature. Since then, the Organization has developed several international programs to better understand and manage the Earth's resources. Over the years, we have learned that comprehensive development depends on efficiency and the ability to provide reliable information, based on environmental data and human activities. Therefore it is advisable to keep abreast of progress in environmental sciences, education, and social transformation.

The need to keep current in these three areas is no less true for the Gulf region. The people in the Gulf have always depended on their marine and coastal resources. These are an integral part of the heritage of the Gulf maritime countries. Extensive inter-tidal and marine ecosystems exist here, with a broad variety of habitats and biological diversity. In a functional sense the ecosystems, via desalination plants, provide drinking water for the local inhabitants, and serve further as areas for recreation, fishing, urban development, and transport.

The coastal areas in the Gulf are very rapidly developing, with several major coastal engineering projects underway. There are most certainly environmental threats, centred on freshwater availability and ecosystem functioning. Therefore, marine and coastal resources must be accorded recognition and attention.

For sustainable development in the Gulf region, it is essential to manage these resources at the highest professional level possible. We must try and continuously guarantee maximum benefit for the human population, and assure at the same time an intact and healthy environment. The benefits include the protection of the human population from environmentally caused diseases, as well as the development of environment-based jobs and income.

It is essential to study the ecosystems in detail, as well as how people used these resources in the past, and what are the prospects for sustainable development. Once the systems are understood, recommendations can be generated on how best to manage the resources, based on knowledge and science.

It is with this in mind that UNESCO decided to support the proceedings of "The First International Conference on the Status of the Gulf Ecosystem: Future and Threats". The reader of this special issue will learn about the existing resources, their ecological and economic values, and the role of scientific environmental assessments and monitoring.

Improving the knowledge of researchers, administrators, and decision-makers, the special issue will contribute towards improved environmental management.

UNESCO believes that these proceedings are a valuable contribution towards sustainable development in the Gulf region, and we hope that it will enhance the positive cooperation between various national and regional agencies, and inspire the environmental stakeholders to continuously work together in the best interest of the people in the Gulf.

We thank the patron of the international conference, the Minister for Higher Education of the United Arab Emirates, His Highness Sheikh Nahayan Mubarak Al-Nahayan for his interest in science-based environmental management, and we also express our thanks to the United Arab Emirates University, as well as the Aquatic Ecosystem Health and Management Society for their excellent cooperation.

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