Opening Address

Opening Speech of HRH Princess Basma bint Talal
Mobile Peoples and Conservation: Crossing the Disciplinary Divide

April 3rd 2002, Wadi Dana

I am delighted to be with you here in Dana, which I think is probably one of the most beautiful areas of Jordan. But in addition to providing an exquisite setting for your meeting, this nature reserve depicts a pioneering approach to conservation: one that seeks to integrate the needs of nature with the needs of the local people, many of whom are still nomadic, and dependent on the natural resources of the Reserve.

Nature conservation, or biodiversity conservation as it is also known, and the fate of mobile peoples, have become a critical issue. As the destruction of natural landscapes continues largely unabated throughout the world, protected areas, natural reserves, national parks, game reserves and the like - have come to embody islands of fundamental importance in an expanding sea of urbanization and degradation. For mobile peoples who live in protected areas, or use them seasonally, these islands are also becoming increasingly valuable, as reservoirs of vital natural resources. As a result, human pressures on protected areas and the wild species they support are growing and are causing serious ecological damage, due to excessive practice of activities such as grazing, wood collection, hunting and water extraction.

This is clearly demonstrated here in Dana, where in times of drought, local tribes now converge on the nature reserve as the only place left in the locality offering perennial water sources and relatively good grazing for their goats. Consequently, the difficulties of reconciling these kinds of strains with the need to conserve endangered habitats and species, can sometimes lead to open conflict with local communities.

We have long put aside the forced evictions of the 20th century and are, at last, recognizing the need to involve local communities in shaping protected area strategies. But we still have a long way to go in acknowledging and respecting the rights of mobile peoples in determining the fate of their land. These communities should not be forced to give up their ways of life or their culture, nor should they be displaced by development or by long-term and large-scale commercial tourism, which often goes under the name of eco-tourism.

Jordan is no stranger to the issue of mobile people. Indeed throughout time, they have formed an inherent part of the Jordanian landscape as we know it today. A significant part of the country's cultural heritage derives from the legacy of its Bedu tribes. The unique city of Petra, for example, was created by the Nabateans, who were originally desert nomads, guarding the trade routes between the Arabian Peninsula and the Mediterranean. And more importantly in contemporary times, the

Jordanian state was to open its doors, more than any other country in the world, to the refugees of Palestine.

Nevertheless, in the case of both indigenous Bedu and refugees, serious considerations presently need to be addressed in relation to the use of Jordan's remaining natural areas. The Bedu tribes of Wadi Rum, for example (as we shall see in the documentary film) are struggling to maintain their own herding economy, while at the same time expand and promote opportunities in the burgeoning eco-tourism industry in Jordan. The second activity in particular, threatens to undermine the ecological integrity of the world-renowned landscape of Wadi Rum. Also nearer to this location, on the fringes of Wadi Araba, refugee Bedu from Beersheba are bringing larger goat herds into the Dana Nature Reserve, as the area of their traditional rangeland shrinks under development demands.

Among the ground breaking attempts to try and resolve such problems are the initiatives being promoted here in Dana, as well as Wadi Rum, by the Royal Society for the Conservation of Nature (RSCN). Over the last eight years, the Society has been working with local communities to create alternative sustainable livelihoods, based on more benign uses of these protected areas. This approach has been predominantly economically oriented, recognizing that poverty is a key reason for the exploitation of the land, and that people are looking for tangible benefits from protecting nature. The focus, therefore, has been to create income-generating and job opportunities, linked to the nature reserve and the philosophy of conservation. A range of small businesses have been launched, including a successful eco-tourism operation, which collectively bring improved economic benefits to hundreds of families.

RSCN is working towards bringing the mobile people who live in the area more significantly into the eco-tourism economy, not only by training and capacity building, but by encouraging them to develop their own businesses which can subsequently be subcontracted to provide required tourism services. Which RSCN does not necessarily claim to have solved people's problems or to be a model of participative approaches, its nature-based socio-economic programmes have contributed towards changing local perceptions and attitudes to nature conservation, and have brought about greater community support and involvement. Over the next few days, I hope you will get the chance to assess the Dana initiatives for yourselves, and to relate RSCN's experience to programmes in your own countries.

I do believe that for everyone here, the opportunity to share information and experiences from different parts of the world, will be one of the greatest benefits of the conference. It is equally gratifying to see that our distinguished participants include sociologists and anthropologists, as well as conservationists: a mixture of disciplines that, until now, have all too rarely been brought together. I congratulate and thank the Refugee Studies centre of Oxford University, and in particular, Dr Dawn Chatty, my very dear friend, for making this possible.

Once again, I welcome you warmly, and wish you a productive and inspiring stay here in Dana.