



## Remembering SHEIKH SAOUD BIN MOHAMMED BIN ALI AL-THANI

Al Wabra Wildlife Preservation's founder and patron, Sheikh Saoud bin Mohammed bin Ali Al-Thani, a highly ranked member of the Qatar Royal family, died on November 9, 2014 suddenly at age 48 in his London home. He left behind a legacy in so many fields; his artistic thwarts were well known to most in the art world. While in Qatar as the former minister of Arts and Culture, he setup the structure for the planned super family of 10 museums—a real Smithsonian in Qatar. He had the Museum of Islamic Art designed by the famous Im Pei coming out of retirement to forge a last amazing structure as a favour to Sheikh Saoud Al-Thani.

Sheikh Saoud Al-Thani, brought a cultural marvel to Qatar, making it the place it is today. With the aim to educate and bring international, historical culture to the Qatari people, his focus moved to the youth and trying to create a nation that cared about history, showed interest in things of the past and thus questioned the future. With the historical aspect, he didn't want his country left in the past and thus pushed for modern designs of amazing national buildings around Qatar. This included his own tower that he built on the city skyline, now known as the "Burj Doha", which was named International Tower of the year in 2012.

Another passion of his was photography and after starting the Al-Thani awards photographic competition, it grew from

strength to strength to become the most sought after, offering the most lucrative prizes in international photographic competitions. Sheikh Saoud Al-Thani tried very hard to get the young Qatari's involved in the competition and as the years went by his success was evident with more and more amazing contributions from young Qatari photographers.

Animals always played a large part of his life; it was evident in the initial categories of the photo competition. Where Arabian horses are an important part of people's lives in this region this was no different with Sheikh Saoud Al-Thani. His collection holds some of the most beautiful specimens and world champions, still winning top prizes to this day.

But with all this going on, very few knew about Al Wabra Wildlife Preservation, Sheikh Saoud Al-Thani's most prized endeavor. He grew up on this hobby farm where he was surrounded by animals, but just as a standard regional hobby farm, with no structure to animal management. Once his father died and Sheikh Saoud Al-Thani took over, he had ideas and plans for Al Wabra; they were grandiose and many thought foolish. But as in the art world, he saw beyond what others in the region could imagine. He focused on turning this hobby farm into an international endangered species breeding centre, one that would be admired by many and set standards for others to follow.





After hiring an international staff to get the place moving in the direction he wanted, he allowed growth and financed all that was needed to get the structures and equipment necessary for a state-of-the-art facility. Beginning mainly with mammals from the Horn of Africa, the collection expanded to birds, now with the biggest captive collection of Bird-of-Paradise in the world, Bulwer's pheasants, one of the more difficult species to breed, to Shoebills and other storks, and of course parrots—most famously the Spix's and Lear's macaws. With the most extraordinary breeding successes at Al Wabra, it is still today an amazing facility growing and continuing its valuable captive breeding programs. This has brought high profile people from around the world to try to get a glimpse of this facility and to see how things are done, but also to see some of the species that are housed within. One of the most famous naturalists of all time arrived in 2013 with his team from the BBC Natural History Group, Sir David Attenborough, to spend a few days filming and enjoying his favourite family of birds, the Bird-of-Paradise. He left impressed with the facilities and staff setup, amazed by what lengths Sheikh Saoud Al-Thani had gone. Many more are desperately keen to visit Al Wabra, this elusive center seen by few, admired by many.

But captive breeding was not the only goal and achievement Sheikh Saoud Al-Thani was pursuing. He wanted in-situ conservation projects, ones that he would be able to make a difference in, mainly places neglected by other organizations. The Horn of Africa was the concentration of much in-situ work, mainly on mammals with a little focus on the Ruspoli touraco along the way. He dabbled in the Caribbean region, but his biggest focus then became Brazil when he decided to get involved in the most controversial conservation project on the planet: the Spix's Macaw Project. After buying up the land available that the last remaining Spix's frequented, the recovery program started. The idea used for in-situ work is the need for the community involvement. Without the community a long term project will never survive in habitat. He wanted the habitat restored to its former glory, he wanted education of the community, support of the community, and sustainable farming methods shown and taught throughout. Most of all he wanted both adults and children in the community involved. All of this was achieved with sponsoring schools, community sports events, cultural events and local aid to the community.

That same focus moved back to Qatar, where Sheikh Saoud Al-Thani pushed to open a portion of Al Wabra for education purposes, starting with internships in the veterinary department and moving to both bird and mammal departments too. Bringing in international university research camps, to help process some of the large amounts of data that was building up during their work with the animals. Research levels at Al Wabra started increasing, with more focus moving into reproductive research, as is needed when working on endangered species. But that was not enough; the international lime light was getting brighter and brighter, while nationally things were quiet. So Sheikh Saoud Al-Thani pushed to have educational tours and presentations/lectures at the facilities for all age groups, from young children to university students—free of charge. Focusing on teaching them more about the animals of their own country, he hoped their encounter with Al Wabra would make them appreciate their environment enough to make a difference!

Sheikh Saoud Al-Thani has created a historical culture for a country, mesmerized the arts and cultural world, pushed the limits to protect endangered species and in the end spent billions of dollars helping others. A rarity amongst men, he was a one in a lifetime amongst his people, a true philanthropist focused on Qatari youth growth and the importance of their environment and the species within.

Sheikh Saoud Al-Thani died aged 48, so much younger than he should have. A massive loss for Qatar and conservation the world over, considering all he did in the last 20 years. Imagine what could have been achieved if he lived for 20 more... One of his most famous quotes which put into perspective his beliefs and the way he lived: *"For me, Art is without nationality, and it transcends any locality. My heritage is Art and Art is a representative of all humanity."*

He has left his wife, a son and 2 daughters behind. They have decided to pick up where he has left off and not let all his lifetime's aspirations go to waste. Instead they plan to continue with all his valuable work in his name.

May all the future years to come, surpass the dreams and plans of Sheikh Saoud Al-Thani. RIP

Cromwell Purchase