



Naturalist-in Series

LIFE AT THE LIMIT

by Chris K. Starr



Review of:

Théodore Monod & Marc de Gouvenain
1996. *Majâbat al-Koubrâ*. Paris: Actes Sud 233 pp.
[53rd in a series on "naturalist-in" books;
see <https://ckstarr.net/book-reviews/>]

Théodore Monod (1902-2000) was a Frenchman who developed into his country's leading expert on deserts and one of the world's leading Sahara experts. Beyond this, he was an outstanding humanist, pacifist and anti-racist, who openly opposed apartheid, nuclear weapons and the French war in Algeria. He is the subject of at least two full biographies (Jarry 1990?, Vray 1994) and has an abundant presence on Youtube, including as the subject of an admirable 1½ hour-long documentary movie <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mgEEPBrJND4>



Source: Wikimedia Commons

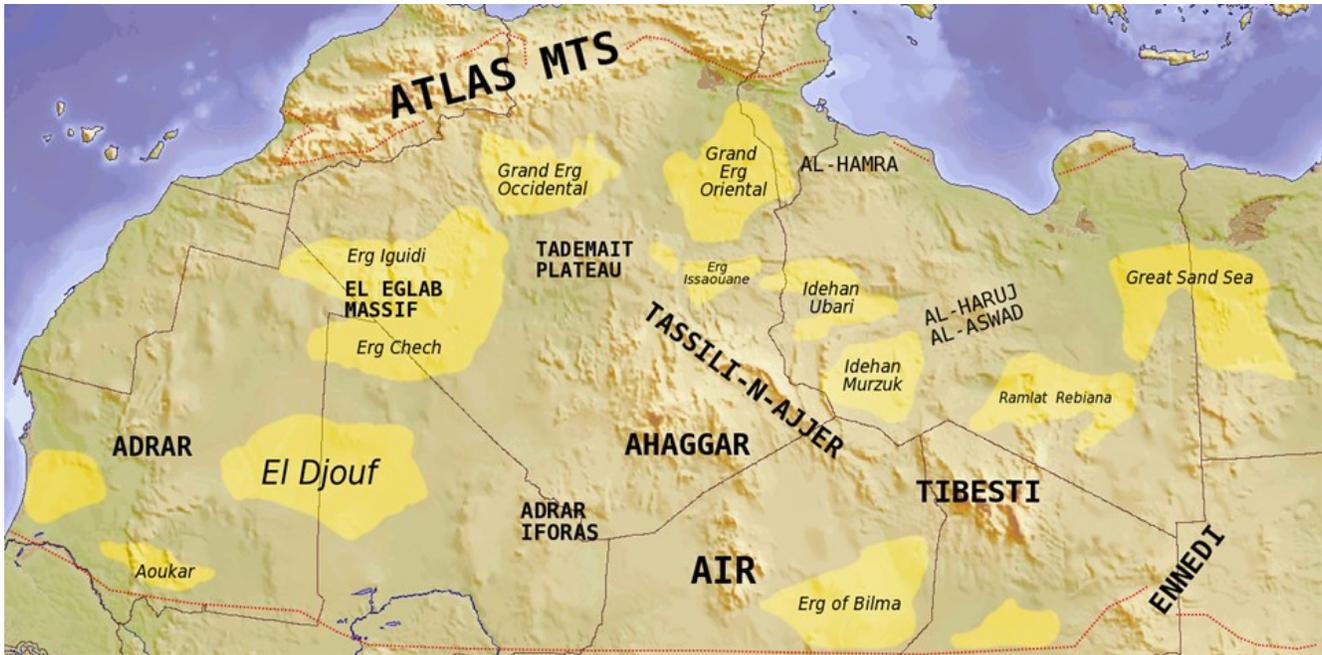
In introducing Theodore Baskaran's 'The Dance of the Sarus' (Review No. 45), I drew attention to an unusual feature of "naturalist-in" books. Those

set in Third World countries are almost always by visitors from advanced industrialized countries, while Baskaran is a native son of India. Still, travels by naturalists from the great powers to the poorer, usually tropical regions have a long, proud tradition that has enriched the literature considerably.

It bears mention that the motivations of the naturalists and their sponsors were often in strong contrast, especially during the colonial period. Beginning with Spain in the 16th century and reaching its peak in 19th century Britain, the colonial powers were mainly interested in possibilities for economic exploitation, while the naturalists of course had quite a different focus. Monod's repeated presence in Mauritania illustrates this tendency well, as he was explicitly there on scientific missions from France and was even embedded as a military officer at times. If this brought this gentle man into conflict with his administrative and military superiors, he kept it to himself, but Monod was far from being an imperialist.

Monod spent his entire working life with the National Museum of Natural History in Paris. However, this is not to say that he lived in Paris or even in France the whole time. He first went to Africa in 1922 to conduct researches in oceanography and marine biology in Mauritania. In the 1930s he became director of the French Institute of Black Africa, headquartered in Senegal, which became a major research institution under his leadership. His main focus was the deserts of North Africa, where he made many major journeys, or méharées (the title of another of Monod's books about Saharan exploration). These were times of extreme frugality, especially with water, which was strictly rationed. Traveling on camel, on a good day they could make 40 km.

Monod set forth a kind of manifesto of just what kind of scientist he was. Quoted by Sers & Monod, he noted that many people of good reputation "are of the opinion that a researcher, in order to do well, must devote himself entirely to a single field and explore it in depth. However, I claim



Map by T.L. Miles. Source: Wikipedia.

the right to take an interest not just in one specialty but in all that nature offers. No matter what others may say, I make no excuses if I go wherever my curiosity leads.”

Married with children, his family life was of course affected by his many and often prolonged absences. He likened it to that of a sailor in the era of European exploration with voyages alternating with periods of home stay.

Most of the southern third of the Arabian Peninsula, an area of about 650,000 km², is so severely inhospitable that it is uninhabited and seldom crossed. This Rub’al Khali, or Empty Quarter, has been the subject of a number of explorations, most famously by Wilfred Thesiger, who made two crossings in the 1940s and wrote an account of them that counts as one of the classics of travel literature.

The Sahara Region of north Africa is far from uniform. The semi-arid zone is marked by an annual precipitation between 150 and 300 mm; following this are the arid (70-150 mm) and hyper-arid zones (less than 70 mm). This latter includes the Sahara’s own Empty Quarter, although much smaller and much less known than that of Arabia. The Majâbat al-Koubrâ, or El Djouf, lies across the boundary between Mauritania and Mali. For humans and most other organisms, it is the most inhospitable part of the Sahara. Annual temperature fluctuations are

minor, but not so the major fluctuations during the day.

It is windy much or most of the time, even if the famous Sahara sandstorms are very rare. For the most part, then, rocks are sculpted not by water but by wind-blown sand. However, this was not always the case in every place. Sand grains can be placed in three main categories, readily distinguishable under the microscope. Unelaborated grains have a rough outline and show traces of their crystalline origin. Round grains with a matte surface indicate the effects of wind and round grains with a shiny surface give evidence of very long submersion, during which they have been polished by wave action. Monod’s examination of samples of Majâbat sand showed that it was of this third type, consistent with the hypothesis that the area was long part of an inland sea.



Source: Wikimedia Commons

The extreme, constant scarcity of water and food for both plants and animals is the over-riding fact of life here. In considering how some manage to hold on in this environment, the plain fact is that most do not. This leads to very low species-richness counts. However, the Majâbat is not a dead zone. Here and there, often in unsuspected places, were tenuous and sometimes tenacious signs of life.



Source: Wikipedia

The totemic animal of the Majâbat is the white antelope or addax, a medium-sized antelope with

distinctive twisted horns up to about 80 cm long. It lives in herds of up to 20 individuals and is very well adapted to survive in this severe desert, where it can live for long periods without water except what comes with its food. The white antelope was previously widespread in North Africa, but due mainly to intensive hunting it is now extinct in most of its native range. There are probably many more in captivity now than in the wild.

References

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NATURE IN THE NEWS

Compiled by Kris Sookdeo



January

Four hunters, two from Grand Couva and two from Freeport, were arrested at a hunting camp at Guayaguayare where officers allegedly found five rounds of Remington 12-gauge cartridges on one of the hunters. Further checks inside the camp by police led to the discovery of a 12-gauge homemade shotgun and six rounds of 12-gauge cartridges. The four hunters were not the holders of firearm licenses.

Police said that based on intelligence gathering, surveillance was conducted and an operation was executed at several locations at Navet Road Heritage, Guayaguayare, Mayaro, during which several hunting camps were searched when the discovery was made.

February

The Noise Pollution Control Rules, 2001 has

been amended to reduce the timeframe required to monitor noise levels from three hours to thirty minutes.

The amendment applies to activities being undertaken with Noise Variation Permits.

According to the Environmental Management Authority the reduction in the timeframe to monitor noise levels is one milestone in the fight against noise pollution as it increases the EMA's ability to monitor a larger number of events and activities in a given day and generate noise level readings with greater efficiency.

March

A Diego Martin man was held transporting 13 baby macaws and a tortoise along the Penal Rock Road. The suspect was taken into custody and is expect to face 14 counts of keeping protected animals in captivity without a permit. 