

Dr. António Abreu

Director of the Division of Ecological and Earth Sciences
Secretary of the MAB Programme
UNESCO
7, place de Fontenoy
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Radebeul, 23 September 2024

Dear Dr. Abreu,

We, the undersigned organizations and scientists, would like to bring to your attention the pressing issue surrounding a fossil gas extraction project set to commence in 2025 in the Marawah Marine Biosphere Reserve in the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

We have encountered information indicating that ADNOC, the UAE's national oil company, is developing a large-scale ultra-sour gas extraction project (the Hail-Ghasha megaproject) that is within the Marawah Marine Biosphere Reserve and beyond.¹ **In order to sustain this massive industrial operation, 17 billion dollars are being spent to build 11 artificial islands, oil and gas wells, a network of pipelines, shipping infrastructure and power lines partly inside this UNESCO-MAB reserve.**² Due to the corrosive, and thus costly, nature of sour gas, the fossil fuel industry has historically avoided developing such reserves. However, the industry is now turning to sour gas as an alternative resource with the depletion of more easily extracted fossil gas.³ **If completed, the project would extract 42 million cubic meters of fossil gas and 120,000 barrels of oil per day,**⁴ **amounting to emissions of over 49.6 million tonnes of CO2 per year.**⁵ **The operation not only presents a severe threat to the reserve's ecological integrity and vulnerable biodiversity, such as its important dugong population, but is also highly incompatible with climate goals, such as the Paris Agreement targets.**

¹ ADNOC, [Supporting Biodiversity](#) (ADNOC, n.d.)

² Reuters, [UAE's ADNOC Awards \\$17 Billion of Contracts for Gas Project](#), October 5, 2023, sec. Climate & Energy.

³ Burgers et al. (2011), [Worldwide Development Potential for Sour Gas](#), Energy Procedia 4, 2178–84.

⁴ Rystad Energy, [Upstream Exploration Solution](#), Rystad Energy, n.d.

⁵ Kühne (2021), [Big Numbers for Bold Activists: A Quick Method for Estimating Potential Emissions of Fossil Fuel Projects](#), Energy Research & Social Science 79, Article 102172.

We have gathered satellite imagery showing the construction of several artificial islands within the reserve over the last few years.⁶ **The situation's urgency is compounded by the lack of transparency around the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA), which is not publicly available.** This lack of openness hinders a comprehensive understanding of the extent of the damage, leaving concerned parties, including the undersigned, in the dark regarding the specific details of the project's existing and potential future environmental consequences.

The Man and Biosphere Programme (MAB) Secretariat has also emphasized the need to be duly informed of significant changes during the reserve's last periodic review in 2018.⁷ **We believe it is evident that the gas extraction project contradicts key principles of the Man and Biosphere Programme,** as it introduces a polluting industry into the transition zone, contradicts international best practice by preventing public accessibility of the EIA,⁸ and therefore undermines the fundamental tenets of biodiversity conservation and sustainable development. As the extraction project is poised to begin before the next periodic review, it is of the utmost importance that this matter be brought to the attention of the MAB Secretariat.

As the largest oil and gas development in a Man and the Biosphere reserve on a global scale, the Hail-Ghasha megaproject symbolizes a growing threat to UNESCO's mission to "safeguard natural and managed ecosystems".⁹ Eleven other MAB-listed biosphere reserves have been impacted by fossil fuel extraction and a further eight are facing planned projects. In addition to contributing almost 10 billion tonnes of CO₂ (in potential scope-three emissions) to the climate emergency, these drilling, mining, and exploration activities destroy irreplaceable natural and cultural landmarks while disrupting local communities and wildlife.¹⁰

In light of the urgency of the situation and recognising the collective responsibility to protect our natural heritage, **we would like to bring to the attention of the MAB Secretariat the implications of the Hail and Ghasha megaproject for the Marawah Marine Biosphere Reserve.** Given UNESCO's pivotal role in safeguarding biosphere reserves, we are eager to discuss any ways in which we may be able to support UNESCO, the MAB Secretariat, and relevant authorities to address this matter effectively.

⁶ Google Maps, [Marawah, 24.390457293337644, 53.36912038141975](#), Google, n.d.

⁷ UNESCO (2018), [Periodic Review Reports and Follow-up Information Received since the Last MAB International Coordinating Council \(MAB ICC\) Meeting](#), UNESDOC Digital Library.

⁸ Amer, et al. (2015), [Management Manual for UNESCO Biosphere Reserves in Africa](#), ed. German Commission for UNESCO and Möller.

⁹ UNESCO-MAB (n.d.), [Our Mission](#)

¹⁰ McGown et al. (forthcoming), Extraction at any cost - Fossil fuels threatening UNESCO Sites. LINGO, October 2024.

We trust in the MAB Secretariat's ability to take decisive action and appreciate your prompt attention to this matter. We look forward to a positive outcome that preserves the ecological integrity of the Marawah Marine Biosphere Reserve.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Experts:

1. Dr. Kjell Kühne (Director, LINGO)
2. Dr. Richard Unsworth (Associate Professor, Swansea University and Project Seagrass)
3. Gaia Dell'Araccia, Ph.D (Senior Seabird Scientist)
4. Bridget Myers, DPT (Graduate Homeward Bound global women in STEMM, CWEF)
5. Anna González Manjón (Postdoctoral Researcher, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona)
6. Dr. Alison Peel (Wildlife Disease Ecologist)
7. Louise Carroll (Senior Meteorologist)
8. Guillem Rius Taberner (Researcher, Universitat de Barcelona)
9. Andreas Sieber (Associate Director of Policy and Campaigns, 350.org)
10. Phoebe Barnard, PhD (Environmental Futurist, Biodiversity and Climate Scientist, Filmmaker, University of Cape Town - South Africa)
11. Dr. Alba Fernández-Sanlés (Biologist)
12. Pavan Kumar Muntha (Director, Swadhikaar Center for Disabilities Information, Research & Resource Development)
13. Nikki de Campe (Research Coordinator, Minderoo Foundation)
14. Dr. Guillermo Tamburini Beliveau (Scientific Research in Environmental Sciences, CONICET)
15. Adriana Humanes (Marine Ecologist / Postdoctoral Research Associate, Newcastle University)
16. Dipak Dholakia (Former Convener of Indian Community Activists Network (ICAN), Loktantrik Rashtranirman Abhiyan)

Organizations:

1. Leave it in the Ground Initiative (LINGO)
2. Deutsche Umwelthilfe / Environmental Action Germany
3. GLOBAL 2000
4. Friends of the Earth (FoE) Japan
5. Climate Action Network Latin America (CANLA)
6. Africa Institute for Energy Governance

7. Bank.Green
8. BankTrack
9. Centro Mexicano de Derecho Ambiental, A.C. (CEMDA)
10. Conexiones Climáticas
11. Fundación Ambiente y Recursos Naturales (FARN)
12. Empower India
13. Extinction Rebellion Hyderabad
14. Asociación de Trabajadoras del Hogar a Domicilio y de Maquila -ATRAHDOM- Guatemala
15. Fundación Quantum Leap
16. GreenFaith
17. Himalayan Alliance for Water and Agriculture (HAWA)
18. Kikandwa Environmental Association
19. Movement for Advancing Understanding of Sustainability And Mutuality (MAUSAM)
20. Rural Reconstruction Nepal (RRN)
21. Swadhikaar Center for Disabilities Information, Research & Resource Development
22. Port Arthur Community Action Network (PACAN)
23. Uso Inteligente ASV A.C.
24. Reaccion Climatica
25. Profundo
26. Rainforest Action Network
27. ReCommon
28. Urgewald
29. The Climate Reality Project