

## Conserving AIUla's flora and restoring the arid landscape – the perspective of a native plant nursery and seed bank

B.P.Y-H. Lee<sup>1,\*</sup>, S.D. Almalki<sup>1</sup>, M.M. Nour<sup>1</sup>, M.A. Kordofani<sup>2</sup>, M.J. Alkurdi<sup>2</sup>, and F.O. Sardidi<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Wildlife & Natural Heritage Division, Royal Commission for AIUla, AIUla, Saudi Arabia

<sup>2</sup>Advacon Contracting, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia

\*Corresponding author email: [b.yihann@rcu.gov.sa](mailto:b.yihann@rcu.gov.sa)

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The AIUla County in north-west Arabia is home to some 450 plant species, which accounts for approximately 20% of Saudi Arabia's total flora. Some parts of the arid landscape have experienced over-grazing by livestock both in the past and at present, resulting in degraded habitats, some devoid of vegetation. Ecological restoration and enhancement is one of the strategic roles of the Wildlife & Natural Heritage Division of the Royal Commission for AIUla (RCU), which oversees the management of about 25,000km<sup>2</sup> of protected areas (PAs) in AIUla County and Harrat Khaybar Protected Area near Al Madinah. In order to operationalise the restoration of degraded habitats, an arid native plant nursery and seed bank was set up in 2021 to be self-sufficient in producing plant stocks and keeping seed resources (of 114 plant species) for large-scale vegetation cover development and ecological restoration initiatives. Apart from plant production, the 6-hectare nursery serves as a tree bank for housing tree species such as *Ziziphus spina-christi*, various species of *Vachellia* spp. and salvaged trees from impending development projects. This presentation will give an overview of the facilities and production capacity of the native plant nursery; the roles and fledging research of the seed bank; and how such a botanical complex is crucial in engaging both local and foreign communities in understanding the importance of plants for ecological restoration in a hyper-arid landscape.