

The Endangered Faiyum (2008)

As already highlighted in the ECHO news article **Faiyumi Sites to be placed on Tourist Map** (<http://www.e-c-h-o.org/News/Tourism.htm>), the Faiyum Depression has been selected for development. These plans were originally formulated in 2005, by the Minister of Tourism, Ahmed el-Maghrabi and the Minister of Environment, Engineer Maged George. These plans were devised to boost environmental tourism, particularly in the Western Desert, the Bahariya Oasis and the Faiyum. These plans for the development of ecotourism are also intended to encourage the development of communities and aid economic progress in the surrounding areas. This proposed development of the north Faiyum is compounded by the building of the 1,200 km Desert Development Corridor “superhighway” running from El-Aleman in the north to Lake Nasser in the South. A rail-track will run parallel to the superhighway. Twelve East-West connectors are planned to connect the superhighway to the main centres of population, one of which is the Faiyum Branch connector. This project is designed to promote the development of the desert north of the Faiyum depression by establishing sites for tourism, new communities and agricultural areas. It would also allow an extension to the west of the Depression for the establishment of industries such as cement production.

It is unclear if a full Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) has been conducted in the region. However, it is clear that in January 2008 a report on the Wadi Rayyan was passed to the Egyptian Prime Minister, Dr. Ahmed Nazif, which asserted that this area houses several geological components, water springs and rare fossils as well as a great number of whale skeletons dating back 40 million years. The area to the north of Lake Qarun has been a protected since the 1980s, and its boundaries have expanded gradually to include Gebel Qatrani and other areas. The site has been proposed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. A committee comprising of the ministries of higher education, environmental and foreign affairs, the Faiyum Governorate and a number of Egyptian universities experts are involved in drawing up a comprehensive plan for boosting investment in the natural and archaeological sites in the whole of the Faiyum Governorate. The UNESCO World Heritage site of Wadi al-Hitan (Whale Valley) has already opened as a tourist attraction for ecotourists. This site has an excellent site management plan in place to prevent tourists damaging the fossils and region as a whole. However, in early 2008 the Arabic press in Egypt reported that the Ministry of Tourism is actively seeking companies and individuals to help with the development of the north Faiyum shore. In real terms, this will result in the building of accommodation and infrastructure.



The excellent preservation of the Ptolemaic to Roman period site of Kom Aushim, which is now in need of conservation due to erosion and digging for mud-brick (*sebakhin*).

The northern shore of Lake Qarun in the Faiyum Depression, from Kom Aushim in the east to Quta in the west is one of the most archaeologically sensitive areas in Egypt. It is one of the few places in the world where a nearly pristine archaeological landscape can be studied. Not only is it archaeologically important, but it is rich in fossils of extinct animals and contains a petrified forest. The discovery in the 1920s of Neolithic (Early Neolithic 5,550-4,650 and Late Neolithic 4,650-4,200 BC) and Epipalaeolithic (7,200-6,200 BC) sites in this region by Gertrude Caton-Thompson and Elinor W. Gardiner rank amongst the most important in the history of Egyptology. The recent re-investigation of the K-Pits and the area up to the Z-Basin by Dr. Willeke Wendrich and her team from UCLA-RUG has added much needed information on the Neolithic and Epipalaeolithic. After boreholes produced evidence of settlement remains 1 km away from the K-Pits at the end of 2006 the UCLA-RUG team decided to rent a six-acre area from local farmers, who had been cultivating the area since the 1960s, so that they could continue to conduct their work in future seasons. This site has subsequently been protected by the SCA. Test pits also revealed that as well as the normal Neolithic package (sheep, goat, wheat and barley) pig bones were also present, along with simple dwellings indicated by clay floors and nearby hearths. These initial investigations are showing that the Neolithic of the Faiyum has various stratified periods of Neolithic occupation. For more on the Epipalaeolithic and Neolithic sites of the Faiyum visit Andie Byrnes excellent website on the subject at <http://www.faiyum.com/>



The towering walls of the Ptolemaic to Roman city of Dimai.

As well as these Epi-Palaeolithic and Neolithic remains there are Old Kingdom, Middle Kingdom, Ptolemaic and Roman sites, which include the world's first paved road. The UCLA-RUG team have also been investigating the Roman site of Qarat el-Rusa using magnetometry to build a complete map of the site. This sub-surface survey revealed the existence of a network of walls and pathways. Test pits have confirmed the existence of walls and houses in mud-brick and blocks of dressed limestone, as well as a large quantity of pottery and the foundations of ovens and grain stores. The team are also conducting site management work at the Ptolemaic to Roman period site of Kom Aushim (Karanis). As part of this research the team are determining the exact boundaries of the site using magnetometry and have found a previously unidentified industrial area. Unfortunately the Cairo-Faiyum motorway cuts the main settlement off from its cemetery, where mud-brick

pyrimidions cover the graves with the owners' names written on them. The area of the cemetery is an area that reports say has been sold off for commercial development, hopefully the site management plans can fence off the area and prevent the cemetery from being destroyed. An ancient small river or a pool has also been located, but it is not yet certain whether the stream had a renewable water source at the time when the settlement was flourishing.

Also located on the northern shore of Lake Qarun are the Middle Kingdom temple at Qasr Sagha and the towering Ptolemaic to Roman period structures of Dimai, and although they are impressive, the archaeological knowledge they impart is secondary in importance when compared to that gained from the Neolithic and Epipalaeolithic sites in the region,. To put this in perspective, if the sites of Dimai or Qasr Sagha were located in England, the USA, or even Italy, they would probably be inscribed on UNESCO's World Heritage List. This is because the amount of Epipalaeolithic and Neolithic sites found outside of the Faiyum in Egypt's Nile Valley is minimal – Badari region, Merimde Ben Salame, Sais, Omari, Magara Dendera 2, El-Kab and only a handful of others. This makes the Faiyum sites particularly precious to archaeology.



The Middle Kingdom temple at Qasr Sagha.

The number of archaeological sites to the north of Lake Qarun amounts to:

1. Palaeolithic = 3
2. Epipalaeolithic = 19
3. Neolithic = 39
4. Predynastic = 4
5. Old Kingdom = 19
6. Middle Kingdom = 2
7. Ptolemaic = 24
8. Roman = 13

These figures do not include sites to the northwest of Lake Qarun, which is an area commonly termed the Empty Quarter, because from Quta in the west to Qasr Sagha, minimal archaeological investigation has been conducted. It is hoped that if funding can be procured that a rescue archaeology project will be conducted in the region later this year. Unconfirmed rumours indicate that this area to the northwest has already been purchased by developers, so the urgency of this survey may be particularly acute. It is expected that sites will be discovered in this region which are of equal or greater importance to those under investigation to the northeast of Lake Qarun for the understanding of the beginnings of Egyptian civilisation.

It is uncertain what form the development of the northern shore of the Faiyum will take, and whether it will go ahead, but it is certain that watching briefs are essential for any development in the area. Consultation with archaeological bodies such as the EAIS, SCA and CultNat are crucial if the destruction of major settlements such as Kom W are to be avoided.

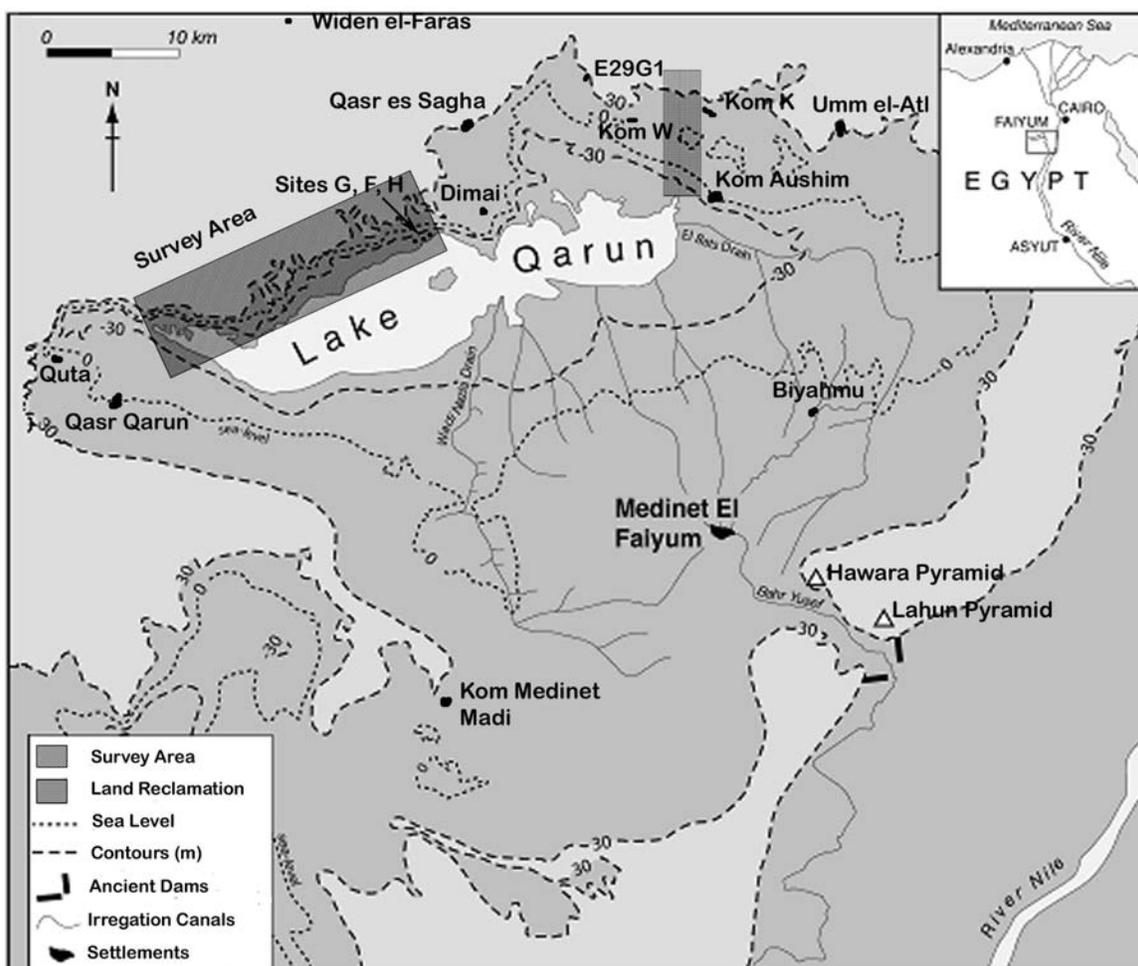


An ancient calcified tree to the southwest of Qasr Sagha.

Tragically, it seems that it is already too late for some sites, such as Kom K, that are already in the midst of modern agricultural development projects. Moreover, the bringing of any tourists to the area puts not only the known sites at great risk, but may destroy evidence of sites which are yet to be discovered. Unless the tours are strictly managed and all the tourists are carefully briefed and monitored it could result in lithics and potsherds being removed (which is a criminal offence) by unsuspecting tourists who want a souvenir of their visit. Taking tourists to fragile sites in the Eastern and Western Deserts has resulted in appalling intentional vandalism as well as the careless and harmful handling of rock art. Rather than preserving the past, the opening up of the north shore of the Faiyum to tourism may have the opposite of the desired effect, for it may destroy the very thing that the tourists want to see and archaeologists wish to preserve: the origins of one of the world's earliest and greatest civilisations.

A June 2011 Update on the Faiyum

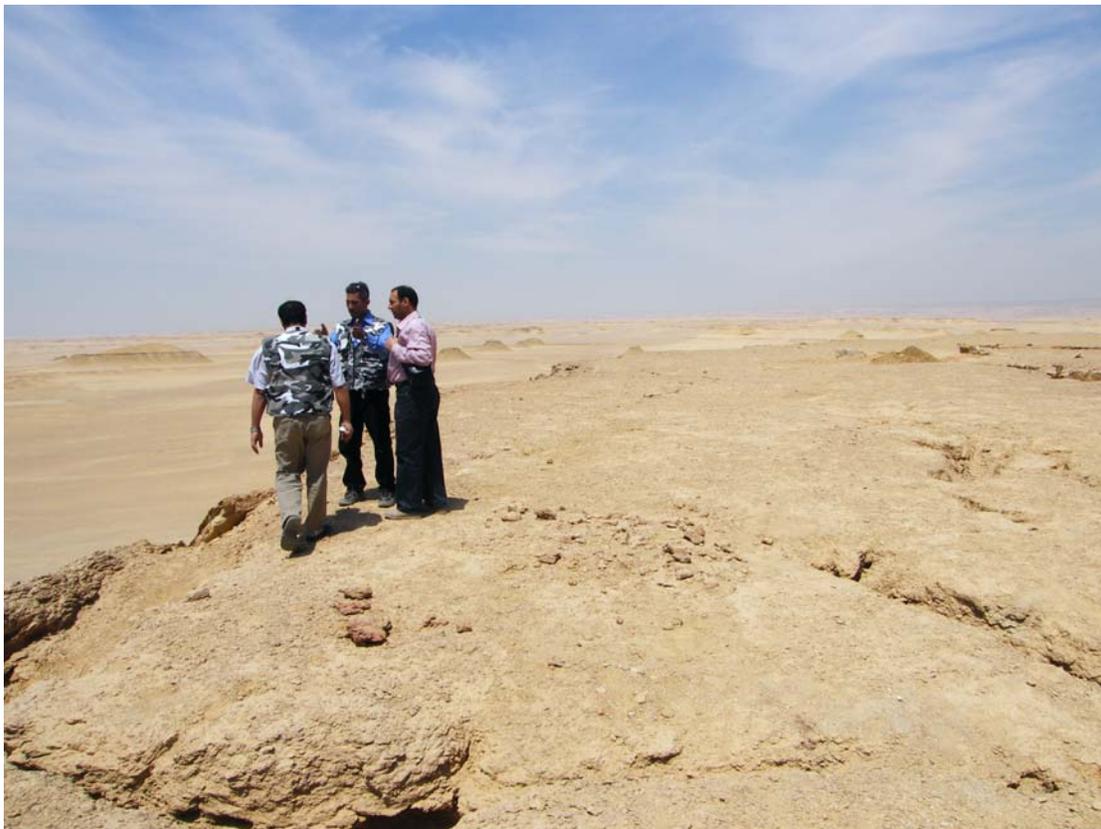
Three years ago the Minister of Tourism Zuhair Garanah decided to sell 20 square km (7.723 sq mile) tract of government land stretching 10 km along the Lake Qarun's northern shoreline to use for touristic purposes. The Amer Group was one of several companies to bid for pieces of this land. This development project to the north-west (hotels and leisure facilities) and another to the north-east (land reclamation) of Lake Qarun are threatening the regional environment, archaeology, and fossil record. The area to the south of Gebel Qatrani, where the tourist development is proposed to be built, is a desert area of outstanding natural beauty. It has recently been proposed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site because it contains one of the world's most complete fossil records of terrestrial primates and marshland mammals as well as remains critical to our understanding of mammalian and human evolution. The region is also one of the most important pristine archaeological regions in Egypt, containing rare Epipalaeolithic and Neolithic sites that contain important data on the beginnings of Egyptian society, along with Pharaonic, Graeco-Roman, Coptic and Early Islamic sites. The region is already a Protected Area and according to the law that regulates protected areas, development projects are forbidden except if both the Ministry of the Environment and the Ministry of State for Antiquities (MSA) agree to give the land to the TDA.



Map of the Faiyum showing the area where the AIA project was conducted.

The selling off of this land to the Amer Group for touristic purposes by Egypt's former Minister of Tourism, who was sentenced to five years in prison for corruption last week (two other officials that sat on the committee that award the Amer Group the land are also in prison fighting

corruption charges), is just one of several troubling business deals he has left in his wake. Mansour Amer of the Amer Group, who plans to build Porto Fayoum on 650 acres (or 2.8 square kilometres) of pristine land on the north coast of Lake Qarun, is also responsible for Porto Marina and Porto Sokhna, two huge tourism developments, the first of which was over the site of an ancient Greco-Roman Port on the North Coast in 2005, and the latter on the once pristine Red Sea coast. Mansour Amer thought the process had been completed in December last year when the Tourism Development Authority (TDA) allocated large chunks of land located in the north of Lake Qarun in the Protected Area. Former President Hosni Mubarak's government awarded the Amer Group a 99-year concession for the land north of Lake Qarun, charging only \$28,000 (\$.01 per square meter) in the first year, rising to an annual \$92,000 in the fourth to 10th years, according to Egypt's American Chamber of Commerce. Amer is a former member of Mubarak's National Democratic Party, and reportedly has close ties to Mubarak and former Minister of Tourism Zuhair Garanah. Sustainable and responsible tourism, particularly ecotourism, is now one of the fastest growing tourism sectors in the world. However, Egypt's official Tourism Development Authority (TDA), currently under investigation for corrupt and improper land deals, authorised these tourist developments. This is all the more surprising as the TDA participated in numerous studies highlighting Lake Qarun's importance for ecotourism, with this body promoting more conventional – and unsustainable – tourism in the Lake Qarun area and throughout Egypt. The former Governor of Faiyum also supported the project against recommendations of experts and donors. Dr Zahi Hawass and officials at Egypt's Ministry of Environment were opposed to the developments, but were unable to stop the building of the half-completed 60-km asphalt road around the lake.



Khaled Saad and members of his team overlooking the area where a group of fossilised whales were discovered.

Nature Conservation Egypt (NCE) is circulating a petition about the plight of the Faiyum (www.petitiononline.com/nce2/); sadly they have not got all the facts correct and failed to identify Dr Zahi Hawass as one of the main protagonists trying to protect the Faiyum from this potentially devastating project. Dr Hawass has already crossed swords with the Amer Group, for in 2009 he stopped construction of the Amer Group's Porto Aswan project after public outcry that it would harm antiquities and the local communities. After a long discussion between the Supreme Council of Antiquities (SCA), the Ministry of Tourism and the Ministry of Culture, with advice from ECHO'S President Prof. Fekri A. Hassan and UCLA's Dr Willeke Wendrich an agreement was reached that an archaeological impact assessment (AIA) should take place before any decision was made about the commencement of any construction work connected with this tourism project would be allowed or not. It appears that a full environmental impact assessment (EIA) was not undertaken, but the decision of the SCA should be sufficient. The Supreme Council of Antiquities in Egypt, headed by Dr Zahi Hawass appointed a team consisting of several members of SCA staff, led by the Director of Prehistoric Archaeology Khaled Saad to initiate a survey and evaluate the archaeological potential of the area. This two year \$1,000,000 project, which was financed by the TDA, commenced in March 2009 and ended in October 2010, just before the 25th January Revolution. The mission found numerous Middle Palaeolithic, Epipalaeolithic, Neolithic and Early Dynastic sites, along with 25 complete and partial fossilised whale remains, many of the latter were new to science. A total of over 500,000 lithic tools were recovered during the project. This project also located the first ever Neolithic burial in the Faiyum, dated by the presence of a concave based arrowhead in the grave pit. Also discovered were a hoard of Ptolemaic coins and other Dynastic remains and also Early Islamic settlements. This Egyptian initiative brought in archaeologists from around the country in a concerted effort to collect as much information as possible before any developers could move in. Foreign archaeologists also worked with the Egyptian team, particularly in the area of lithic analysis, and ECHO's Managing Director Dr G. J. Tassie visited the mission to observe first hand the excellent work they were doing



Part of the planned new tarmac road leading to Dimai which is still under construction and is currently 44 km long.

Although the data is still being analysed and the results of this project await publication, what is already clear is that the area to the north-west of Lake Qarun holds a great deal of archaeological information. Saad wants to move on to another strip close by the area he has already investigated. Combined with the already completed projects of Caton-Thompson, Fred Wendorf and Willeke Wendrich to the north-east of Lake Qarun, along with the many environmental and palaeontological studies it is obvious that the region should have no development and should remain as a protected area, with only a few accompanied ecotourists allowed to visit. The Faiyum contains over 250 archaeological sites, as well as pristine bird habitats, and has been designated a BirdLife International Important Bird Area. It is surely time that this important region for the Neolithic origins of the Egyptian state was made a WH Listed region and given international as well as national protection. This makes a mockery of the statement made to Reuters by the former Housing Minister Ahmed el-Maghrabi, who is in jail fighting corruption charges, that "It has been completely cleared by the department of antiquities. We made sure of that," He went on to say "This project was approved several years ago but no progress was going to be made until the department of antiquities finished their work. And they did finish their work." This statement is naïve at best for there is enough archaeological, palaeontological, environmental and geological work in the area north of Lake Qarun that needs to be undertaken to keep several teams busy for the next 200 years and beyond. It is inconceivable that the vast amount of archaeological sites in this region could be fully excavated and all the scientific data removed in such a short time period. These sites need to be preserved so that scientists in the future can have the opportunity of returning to them with new methods and techniques to investigate humanity's past.

ECHO has been campaigning for five years to protect the environment and archaeology to the north of Lake Qarun and is pleased to confirm that until Khaled Saad submits his final report on the importance of the excavations and the various archaeological sites to the north of the Faiyum no development should take place. The sheer amount of data the Khaled and his team collected will take some time to analyse, but the preliminary results already indicate that this is an area of world importance. Hawass has appointed a committee to go there and make further examinations of the area before he decides how to proceed. At present, the site is completely under the authority of the Ministry of State for Antiquities (MSA) and no one else at present has touched it.

Zahi Hawass stated that the MSA would never support giving Lake Qarun to the Amer Group to build tourist sites because it is such an unspoiled and archaeologically rich area, and he has told the Ministry of Tourism and other bodies as much. However, he will wait to see what the opinion of the appointed committee is. Although this is not a decision that is completely within the jurisdiction of the MSA and other important figures in these uncertain times also have a say in the out come of this affair. The MSA is currently trying to obtain jurisdiction over the Ministry of Tourism to stop this project. Even if the decision goes against reason and the facts, and the Amer Group does start building ECHO will still continue to protest this immoral project, for only if sustainable tourism is given a chance to take hold will Egypt and its natural and cultural heritage be better protected for future generations! Sustainable tourism will also benefit the local communities, not just line the pockets of some wealthy businessman. The decision taken by the ex-Minister of Tourism, the TDA and the Amer Group to ignore the recommendations of several well-informed bodies to practice sustainable ecotourism and go down the unsustainable commercial tourism route defies logic, and shows a total disregard for not only the natural and cultural heritage of the region, but also to the local community and the tourists who may wish to visit the Faiyum. ECHO calls upon the archaeological community to support Dr Hawass in his quest to protect the northern shore of Lake Qarun from unscrupulous profiteers, and urges people to sign the current NCE petition, ignoring the omissions in their reporting of the situation, for this is an important fight for justice.

Nature Conservation Egypt and the signatories of this petition are calling on the Egyptian government to:

- 1) Rescind this illicit land deal and return this land to the Egyptian people.

- 2) Abolish all TDA jurisdiction in the Lake Qarun Protected Area and return the land to the Ministry of Environment's Nature Conservation Sector, the body responsible for Egypt's Protected Areas.
- 3) Declare the northern part of Lake Qarun Egypt's first UNESCO Geopark.
- 4) Take steps to protect this area's rich natural and cultural heritage by developing the Geopark's management and infrastructure, turning it into a genuine ecotourism attraction for the Faiyum Depression and Egypt.
- 5) Undertake the necessary measures and procedures to declare the Gebel Qatrani Geopark as a UNESCO World Heritage Site (which it meets both on cultural and natural grounds) to bring recognition to this area of global importance.

Many other property developers have also come under increasing public scrutiny for their land purchases from Mubarak's government, and some of the firms have subsequently relinquished tracts of land. These property developers are very wealthy and it is time that legislation comes in that makes them pay for surveys, site evaluation and watching briefs and if necessary full excavation of a site, commonly termed archaeological impact assessments (AIAs). These AIAs are common practice in many parts of the world and form part of a larger environmental impact assessment, which are legal requirements of any development project and are designed to protect the cultural heritage and environment. For far too long developers have had an easy ride and have become fat cats on the back of Egypt's lack of heritage legislation. In this era of change in Egypt this is a loophole that must be closed. The implementation of this legislation is particularly important in the mega city of Cairo, the size of which seems to be increasing on a daily basis.

Just as worrying as the danger from the construction of tourist infrastructure is the large amount of looting occurring in the Faiyum. Along with the well reported looting of Gerza news is coming through of looting at Dimai and within the Middle kingdom temple at Qasr Sagha, as well as loaders attacking other sites in the area to the north of Lake Qarun. Many of the other Ptolemaic to Roman sites have also been attacked, only a few sites such as Medinet Madi and Ghorab seem to have escaped the attentions of these looters. Several people within the villages have also been caught excavating below their houses to look for antiquities in this archaeologically rich region.



**Quarrying
near Kom W.**