Executive Summary

Report on the State of Culture in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Digitalization of Culture 2020
The Covid-19 pandemic tested the resilience of sectors across the globe—culture and creative industries are certainly no exception. While 2020 brought about unprecedented challenges for the Saudi cultural sector, it generated equally exciting opportunities. Under the leadership of the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud and the Crown Prince His Royal Highness Prince Muhammad bin Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud, the Kingdom’s cultural sector continued to resiliently flourish.

The Saudi people hold a deep-seated belief in their nation’s cultural vision, and over the course of this past year, they worked diligently to transform that vision into a lived reality. Despite tremendous obstacles and social distancing measures, culture and creative industries proved their indispensable value as a potent unifying force. Nowhere has this been more evident than in the sector’s ability to adapt to the virtual space and utilize its various tools and platforms—as the sector looked inward for inspiration, it was met with ubiquitous creative talent and innovative adaptability.

The cultural sector stands as a testament to the vitality of Saudi Vision 2030. The Kingdom is dedicated to promoting and protecting national cultural heritage, while exploring new cultural horizons. Over the past year, community involvement in cultural sub-sectors such as culinary arts, fashion, and the visual arts increased dramatically. Economic contributions from the architecture and design, film, and music sectors also witnessed a substantive uptick, in addition to positive strategic momentum in publishing, translation, and language, as well as cultural activities at large.

Together we weathered an unprecedented year for culture. The Covid-19 pandemic contributed to both the challenges and achievements of all sixteen cultural sub-sectors. The importance of cooperation between the legislative, financial, manufacturing, and incubating institutions to advance cultural objectives is now glaringly clear. Everyone, from concerned individuals, intellectuals, and creatives to the general public, worked collectively to create suitable alternative activities and adapt to the shifting realities of life. We are now witnessing these efforts manifest in a rich and robust Saudi cultural ecosystem.

Today we are pleased to present to you the second edition of The Report on the State of Culture in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2020: Digitalization of Culture. The report highlights areas of cultural growth as well as stories of setbacks and corresponding recovery. It sheds light on Saudi cultural production across various fields, and documents the most important cultural initiatives, projects, programs, and events of the year, while tracking opportunities and challenges unique to each sub-sector.

Prior to the pandemic, a shift towards the digitalization of various industries was already underway. The pandemic has accelerated the pace of digital transformation and, in turn, amplified its importance. Therefore, the lion’s share of the report is dedicated to discussing the digitalization of culture, documenting the personal realities of cultural practitioners in our country as they navigate the new normal. The report demonstrates that even as the challenges before them grew, so too did their achievements.

Our aim in the annual cultural report is to monitor the state of culture in Saudi Arabia and present an accurate picture of the sector, in both good and challenging times.

Proud of our culture—our journey together will undoubtedly continue to flourish.
Executive Summary

The 2020 Report on the State of Culture in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia aims to monitor developments across all cultural sectors and document the achievements of participating individuals and institutions. The report also measures levels of cultural participation, while tracking relevant trends in cultural creativity and production. It features the special theme of “Digitalization of Culture,” including a preliminary account of the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on cultural sectors. Cultural and creative industries faced exceptional challenges this year, such as postponing and cancelling public events and activities, the closure of cultural facilities during periods of lockdown, and the abrupt halt of international cultural tourism.

- In a dynamic response to the circumstances imposed by the pandemic, a broad cultural scene flourished in the virtual space. The unusual circumstances did not only change means of cultural dissemination but also left their mark on creative content. However, the virtual alternative did not offset the profound impact of the pandemic on the cultural sphere, as cultural production and distribution cycles were severely hindered. Furthermore, cultural actors did not enjoy equal opportunities to digitalization, either due to limited access to the necessary technologies or due to the inherent nature of the activities themselves.

- The Covid-19 pandemic has only increased the urgency of understanding the opportunities and challenges presented by the digitalization of culture. The report addresses a number of aspects of digital transformation in each cultural sector across four dimensions: (1) culture in the virtual space; (2) digital consumption of cultural products; (3) the virtual cultural experience; and (4) utilizing digitization to preserve cultural heritage.

- While virtual options created important opportunities for overcoming pandemic-induced stagnation, the report provides indications of the limited appeal and impact of virtual activities when viewed comparatively as a substitute for in-person ones.

- The report documents the lack of preparedness of some cultural sectors to provide comprehensive digital experiences that go beyond simple displays on social media platforms. Local alternatives to digital streaming services were also inadequate or nonexistent altogether. Finally, the report highlights the importance given to the digitalization of cultural heritage, as reflected in a number of ambitious active digitization projects undertaken by a number of institutions across all cultural sectors.

The report draws on a number of sources: 1) quantitative data from 70 entities, including ministries, government agencies, cultural institutions, public libraries, and art galleries; 2) the Cultural Participation Survey (2nd wave) for which a representative sample of 3,112 individuals from across the Kingdom were interviewed; and 3) two surveys covering samples of private museums and art galleries. The report also makes use of a range of published reports and media sources, in addition to qualitative data from 18 focus groups in which 130 practitioners, officials, and experts in cultural affairs in the Kingdom participated.
Language

- In 2020, contributions by academic institutions and Arabic language centers enriched the sector in different forms, including scholarly publications, online forums, and conferences—a format that allowed for greater public participation. The Kingdom’s Arabic-language journals were recognized with high rankings in the Impact Factor criteria used to evaluate journals published in Arabic.

- The sector witnessed the launch of several initiatives, ranging from new Arabic language standardized tests to language programs and educational competitions on social media platforms. Pandemic-induced digitalization contributed to expanding the outreach of language-related activities to a broader audience through the adoption of virtual events. One illustrative example is the wide public participation in online celebrations of the World Arabic Language Day, hosted by a variety of institutions.

- The 2020 Cultural Participation Survey provided insights into participants’ preferences on the use of Arabic and English in different contexts. While only 1% of the sample preferred to use the English language socially, 8% of respondents preferred to use English in professional or educational settings. This disparity highlights the need to develop a system of robust language policies that promote the Arabic language as an engine for knowledge production and localization.

- The pandemic posed additional challenges to institutes for teaching Arabic as a second language. On top of their technological unpreparedness to teach Arabic online, these institutes witnessed a sharp drop in demand for their services in light of the suspension of international travel. Despite these challenges, institutes have quickly adapted and benefitted from E-learning programs that have made significant progress at Saudi universities in recent years.

- A number of institutions in the Kingdom are working towards addressing the growing need to integrate Arabic language with digital technologies, especially in the field of artificial intelligence. In addition to these institutions, The King Salman International Complex for Arabic Language was established in 2020 with a mandate that sets out the intersection of language and artificial intelligence as one of its many scopes of work.
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Literature

- Literary publishing rates continued to grow despite this year’s exceptional circumstances. The total number of published titles increased to 663; the novel remains the most popular form, accounting for 201 titles. Biographies and memoirs also witnessed notable growth in 2020. The pandemic impacted literary content itself, as reflected in a number of works whose themes were inspired by the pandemic in the second half of the year.

- Virtual literary events emerged as an alternative to in-person activities that were canceled or postponed due to the pandemic. Not only did formal institutions host virtual events, but individuals took the initiative to hold literary meetings on their personal social media accounts. Many literary competitions were also held online, some of which were extremely popular. For example, more than 95,000 people participated in the “Literature in Isolation” initiative, organized by the Literature, Publishing, and Translation Commission, which was established and unveiled its strategy in 2020.

- According to the Cultural Participation Survey, 3.6% of respondents attended literary and poetry events this year. While the foregoing percentage does not necessarily reflect an unusually low turnout for this kind of cultural activity, the survey indicates a particularly low rate of participation among women and young people compared to the older male demographic.

- Digital media offered new avenues for the circulation of literary works: podcasts, social media platforms, and video broadcasting platforms all influenced the form of literary works to varying degrees. For example, very short stories and new forms of “flash” poetry translate well to social media posts, while performance-oriented genres are more suited to audio-based platforms. Although literary production leveraged digital media, “digital literature” as a genre is largely absent from the literary scene, with the exception of a few experiments.
The fashion sector faced logistical challenges in 2020 due to the pandemic. By May, preventive public health measures resulted in a decrease in industrial production of apparel by 46%, in addition to the temporary closure of outlets such as retail stores and shopping centers. These challenges led to a low point of 5 billion riyals in clothing and shoe sale revenue in the second quarter of 2020. However, the industry bounced back as restrictions were lifted and normalcy began to return, bringing in a total of more than 9 billion riyals in the fourth quarter.

Despite sector-specific challenges, the pandemic has led to the emergence of new and creative trends, with an increased focus on comfort and home-friendly attire. Designers have also created different mask designs to complement outfits for a variety of social and professional settings.

Online shopping doubled in the past two years, with 15.26% of respondents in the General Authority of Statistics’ survey in 2018 reporting they shopped online, compared to 30.17% in 2019. Due to the pandemic, reliance on e-commerce amplified this trend: online shopping sales were 364% higher in early 2020 than in the comparable period in 2019. The number of online stores registered on Maroof platform grew by 171% from January to October, with the sale of clothing and jewelry among the most represented activities on the platform.

In the traditional segment of the sector, a total of 1,932 artisans of various styles of traditional fashion and jewelry were registered in the Saudi Handicrafts Program (Bari’) this year. A plethora of initiatives offered support for artisans who had lost opportunities to reach their regular clientele due to pandemic-induced difficulties. Most importantly in 2020, Al Sadu, a traditional Saudi Arabian and Kuwaiti weaving style, was inscribed on UNESCO’s Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.

Key organizational developments have improved professionalism in the fashion design sector. Data from the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Development in 2020 reflects the growing number of fashion design professionals in the country. This trend has been catalyzed by the recognition of new cultural professions, some fashion-related, in the new Unified Saudi Vocational Classification Guide. In February 2020, the Fashion Commission, a body responsible for developing the sector, was established.
Film

- In 2020, Saudi film production was marked by the prominence of feature films and by production agreements between the private sector and digital streaming platforms. Despite the pandemic, more Saudi films were screened in movie theaters this year compared to 2019. Beyond feature films, production grants were awarded by the Red Sea Film Festival Foundation and Daw’ Film Competition to support local films. Additionally, several films and film directors received funding and grants from international film labs and festivals.

- Saudi film festivals were hit hard by the Covid-19 pandemic: the first Red Sea International Film Festival was canceled, and the sixth Saudi Film Festival was moved online. The latter garnered over 63,200 views on YouTube – a unique experience that brought new life to the burgeoning Saudi film industry during nationwide quarantine.

- The pandemic propelled virtual spaces to the helm of the sector, not just as a medium to screen Saudi films, but also as an interactive arena for competitions and creative discussions pertaining to film and the art of filmmaking. The Saudi film library has expanded into various streaming platforms, allowing Saudi films to reach new audiences - both locally and internationally - thereby bypassing domestic distribution obstacles. According to the Cultural Participation Survey, digital platforms retain a higher preference rate (34%) than other alternative viewing options.

- Although the Saudi film sector lacks several key components, it reflects boundless potential. The Saudi film industry is indeed one of the fastest growing film industries in the Middle East, with over 6 million movie tickets sold in 2020 – a much higher figure than the previous year’s, despite extended cinema closures. This performance coincided with the expansion in the number of theaters from 12 to 33 across the Kingdom. Furthermore, box office revenues in Saudi Arabia generated the largest profit growth in the region. The sector counts on the Film Commission - established in February 2020 - to support the film industry by empowering local talent and fostering an environment conducive to a prosperous filmmaking industry.
Theater and Performing Arts

- Theatrical production had a strong start at the beginning of the year. However, due to the pandemic, the number of theatrical performances and other performing arts events experienced a sharp decline when compared to pre-pandemic figures. There were only 68 theatrical performances in 2020, compared to 169 by the same groups the year prior. This decline prompted many actors, screenwriters, directors, and producers to channel their activities toward virtual events and online workshops.

- As the pandemic forced specific cultural sectors, including theater, to operate virtually, a debate emerged about virtual theater. While only one attempt was made to present a fully virtual production, some theatrical experiences took advantage of digital media to broadcast live theatrical performances – a practice expected to continue long after the pandemic is behind us. Aside from digitizing dissemination of theatrical performances, attempts to introduce digital technologies into the production or narrative construction of local theater were largely absent.

- More than 45,000 people attended theatrical performances presented by the General Entertainment Authority (GEA) in the first quarter of 2020—a significant increase from the same period in previous years. However, the cancellation of in-person theatrical performances due to the pandemic led to a decline in total attendance in the remainder of the year. For example, plays presented by the Saudi Arabian Society for Culture and Arts (SASCA) drew in only 9,637 attendees in 2020, compared to 37,000 in 2019.

- Performing arts events were particularly popular, drawing more than half a million attendees to events organized by the GEA in the first quarter of the year alone. These events included performances, circuses, stand-up comedies, and more. SASCA branches presented 44 traditional art shows, attended by approximately 7,655 people.

- The theater sector witnessed a number of significant initiatives and organizational developments this year. Among the most important were the establishment of the National Theater at the beginning of the year and the subsequent establishment of the Theater and Performing Arts Commission. Partnerships were formed with the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Development to improve professionalism in the sector by offering educational and development opportunities.
As in other cultural sectors, concerts and music events were restricted to virtual platforms. Live concerts, musical evenings, and conversations with a number of Saudi and Arab artists were streamed online, offering innovative ways to deliver a musical experience.

Although virtual broadcasting facilitated the delivery of music events to an expanded audience online and free of charge, these new types of shows had a limited ability to attract a wide audience, as evident in data-driven indicators. The Cultural Participation Survey indicated that the average attendance rate for virtual musical events was less than 2.5%, reflecting a major challenge to the viability of virtual platforms as a replacement for live concerts.

While consumption of music through streaming services and their revenues in the Kingdom continue to rise, these numbers are generated through international streaming platforms. There remains a need for national streaming platforms that effectively curate local music and cater to listeners’ diverse tastes across the Kingdom.

The Music Commission was established in 2020 to undertake the development and regulation of the music sector, which remains primarily reliant on amateur and self-trained artists. To address this shortcoming, the Ministry of Culture issued licenses for the first two music academies in the Kingdom this year. The Saudi Standard Classification of Occupations also formally recognized music-related professions in efforts to buttress the professionalization of the sector.
Cultural Festivals and Events

- The Covid-19 pandemic posed a major challenge to the cultural festivals and events sector in 2020- all events, festivals, and seasons were canceled, with the exception of National Day celebrations, which were held with comprehensive precautionary measures. Most events were moved online, challenging event organizers to adapt their programs and plans accordingly. Despite their efforts, not all the events proved economically sustainable. Put simply, the available platforms for hosting events online do not provide the same ambiance and experience as in-person events.

- Despite the abundance of virtual activities during quarantine, online events were less popular than in-person events. Attendees missed the sensory experiences associated with live events, especially those themed around food, family, and children. The Cultural Participation Survey indicated that only 10% of respondents attended online events.

- The General Entertainment Authority (GEA) issued only 162 events licenses from January to October 2020, down from 502 events licensed in the same period of 2019. The total number of event attendees in 2020 was just 3,754,883 people. For comparison, a single event in 2019, the Jeddah Season, attracted more than 14 million visitors.

- The impact the pandemic had on the sector can be seen clearly through indicators of cultural tourism. While attending cultural events accounted for 44% of all domestic trips that included cultural activities in 2019, it dropped to merely 26% for the first nine months of 2020. Likewise, only 1,669,991 trips taken by domestic tourists included attendance of cultural events, compared to 5 million in 2019.

- The General Entertainment Authority (GEA) registered 1,128 facilities and locations for holding events and festivals. Of those sites, 59.9% are in the central region of the country, 16% in the western region, 7.9% in the northern region, 7.5% in the eastern region, and 8.4% are in the southern region. In addition, 4,349 commercial enterprises specializing in exhibitions and conferences are active today, together with 1,709 commercial enterprises specializing in organizing entertainment events.
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In spite of the pandemic-induced productivity challenges, prominent architectural and urban projects were announced this year at a similar pace to 2019. Work on mega-projects that will help develop the architecture and design sector in the Kingdom also continued uninterrupted.

The pandemic contributed to reshaping design preferences and priorities. New trends in home design and furniture selection emerged, with an emphasis on curated living spaces, outdoor patios, lighting, and ventilation. Concerns about social distancing led to a reconsideration of the design of public, commercial, and professional spaces to make seating and high-traffic areas more compatible with safety requirements.

Various design houses grappled with challenges, including a contraction in the private sector and difficulties implementing projects in their final stages remotely. Administratively, the transition to remote work led to faster and more effective communication between designers and clients. Despite the slowdown of production and manufacturing processes, some fields—such as game design and manufacturing—were met with high demand during quarantine.

The sector enjoyed a creative boom in 2020, with a number of distinguished works winning local and international awards. Competitions emerged as a means for supporting students, amateurs, and professionals in the architecture and design field. The winners were awarded the opportunity to transform their works into architectural and design products.

The virtual space allowed the sector to remain active through online events, such as conferences and exhibitions. Similarly, online classes and training programs gained popularity during quarantine, as they seized the opportunity to expand virtually despite some challenges, such as their weak educational outcomes.

A number of important organizational developments in the sector took place in 2020. These included the establishment of the Architecture and Design Commission in February, in addition to a number of the Kingdom’s regions opting into the urban code projects launched several years ago, the latest of which was the comprehensive development of Wadi Hanifa under a new urban code. Likewise, several design studios were established to support the implementation of these projects.
Heritage

- Survey and excavation work that had already commenced continued with the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, taking all necessary precautionary measures at the sites. In particular, four archaeological sites were excavated near Makkah and Riyadh, and 13 excavation missions were undertaken by both local and international teams. Work on a number of projects to document and preserve national heritage, such as the Coding of Urban Heritage Buildings project, also continued. This work complemented the development and rehabilitation of several heritage sites around the Kingdom, including historic villages and mosques.

- A number of documentation initiatives to preserve the intangible cultural heritage of the Kingdom emerged in 2020, ranging from local communities recording elements of their own heritage to institutional projects aimed at documenting oral history. Internationally, the art of Al Sadu, a traditional Saudi Arabian and Kuwaiti weaving style, was inscribed on UNESCO’s Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, and adorned the logo of the G20 Summit, which was hosted by the Kingdom in 2020.

- In 2020, a number of initiatives to develop the national cultural heritage sector were launched concurrently with the establishment of the Heritage Commission in February. The most prominent of these initiatives were a project to restore and rehabilitate urban heritage buildings of architectural and historical significance in Riyadh city center, the establishment of the Center for the Protection of Underwater Cultural Heritage in the Red Sea and Arabian Gulf, the Tadwin project to create digital records of sites of rock art and inscriptions, and the announcement of key archaeological discoveries.

- As domestic tourism recovered after a slowdown in March 2020, heritage trips’ share of all trips that included cultural activities increased compared to 2019. With the suspension of many tourism activities, heritage sites were among the few tourist attractions that were still open to the public during the pandemic.

- Despite the cancelation of many live heritage festivals and events, the virtual space allowed practitioners in both public and private heritage institutions and associations to revitalize the sector and engage with the public through various forms, such as online workshops.

- Artisans in the Kingdom were affected by the cancellation of heritage events and festivals, which remain the main outlets for displaying and marketing their artisanal work. To address this challenge, financial support programs were launched, and 600 artisans received material compensation for loss of work during quarantine.
Visual Arts

- The Covid-19 pandemic disrupted the momentum of ongoing forums, exhibitions, and programs in the visual arts scene. As many art exhibitions were canceled, and various logistical challenges impacted on artistic production, the Saudi art community showed resilience by exploring virtual alternatives, with artists capitalizing on their free time to continue creating whilst building a community of solidarity and support. The pandemic influenced creative output, with some exhibitions focusing explicitly on themes inspired by it. The Visual Arts Commission - a body responsible for developing and regulating the sector - was also established in 2020.

- In December 2019, the Ministry of Culture announced that 2020 would be the Year of Arabic Calligraphy. In 2020, the ministry announced that the year would extend to 2021 to allow more time for the initiative to actualize its true potential. The initiative was accompanied by the launch of several related initiatives and competitions aimed at supporting, training, and motivating amateurs and professionals interested in Arabic calligraphy. Activities celebrating the Year of Arabic Calligraphy were held in public venues across various cities in the Kingdom.

- In 2020, only 162 art exhibitions were held in the Kingdom, compared to 255 in 2019, with 59% of them held in the regions of Makkah and Riyadh. According to a survey of several art galleries - drawn from a non-comprehensive list of galleries - 67 in-person art exhibitions were held in 2020 and 13 were held virtually, while 32 exhibitions were canceled.

- The 2020 Cultural Participation Survey reported a decline in the attendance at art exhibitions compared to previous years. Only 7.8% of those surveyed reported attending an exhibition in person, and even fewer (2.5%) reported visiting a virtual exhibition. 21.7% of those surveyed expressed an interest in owning original artwork.

- The use of digital technologies as a platform for showcasing artworks was a central theme in the visual arts sector this year. Although virtual exhibitions were limited both in number and in terms of their ability to present work effectively and draw in attendance, they were increasingly regarded as complements to in-person exhibitions and an opportunity to make them more accessible to a geographically broader audience.
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Museums

- Museums all around the world have been adversely affected by the Covid-19 pandemic, as most museums were forced to close their doors in mid-2020. In Saudi Arabia, museums were closed by mid-March, resulting in postponed events and widespread cancellations. Small private museums were particularly challenged. A survey conducted on a sample of small private museums in the Kingdom found that 33% of them had lower average revenue, and more than 15% of those surveyed reported that they might suspend activities even after the pandemic.

- The pandemic led to the utilization of virtual museum tours and exhibitions, but these events were not particularly popular. The exception was those museums with the financial and technical capacities to use websites and social media accounts to reach the public. Other museums, especially small private museums, were at a disadvantage in the digital space. Given the centrality of a robust digital infrastructure only 13% of small private museums were able to maintain a strong online presence during the pandemic.

- Although the museum sector has taken important steps to digitize collections in recent years, and nearly a third of the public museum holdings have been digitized, there is still a long way to go in order to complete the digitization of collections and prevent the loss of any materials. This will be achieved through the creation of a national database and by introducing digitization standard practice in private museums. The survey of small private museums indicated that about 44% of them had databases with photos of items, while 33% had no record of their holdings.

- Museums in the Kingdom are classified according to their holdings (general versus specialized museums) and their size (large versus small museums). Several new projects were launched in 2020 to establish specialized and public museums affiliated with development-oriented institutions and projects. In addition, 13 large private museums will be established as major national projects, 11 of which will be in Riyadh, one in Makkah, and one in the Tabuk region. Presently, there are 261 private museums licensed in the Kingdom, of which 43 are large (owned by institutions) and 218 are small (owned by private individuals).

- The museum sector in the Kingdom is undergoing pivotal organizational and structural transformations. In January 2020, the Council of Ministers issued a decree to transfer supervision of the National Museum in the King Abdulaziz Historical Center to the Ministry of Culture. In February, a decision was made to establish the Museums Commission, with the primary purpose of sector-based management and development. And in July, the formation of its Board of Directors was announced.
Our Culture, Our Identity

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The Covid-19 pandemic affected most of the basic services offered by libraries, including receiving visitors, providing reading spaces, and lending out books. All libraries stopped receiving visitors in mid-March and were closed for varying lengths of time. After the stay-at-home order was lifted and public institutions were allowed to resume their activities, some libraries reopened to visitors while abiding by relevant precautionary measures.

Libraries were able to continue fulfilling their indispensable cultural role during the pandemic after moving activities online. Some libraries adapted quickly and continued their activities virtually, offering public events, academic discussions, and events for children and young adults online. Similarly, some libraries utilized their online capabilities, by granting members of the public and researchers alike online access to their collections. These adaptations mitigated the negative consequences of the pandemic on the sector.

Efforts to digitize knowledge have been growing in the sector in the last few years. Many libraries have already adopted projects to this end, with special attention given to digitizing rare collections. This year, the Libraries Commission launched an integrated platform to house digitized manuscripts in the Kingdom.

The Libraries Commission was established in 2020 to oversee the organization and support of the library sector in the Kingdom. The Commission’s first initiative for the development of public libraries was announced by the Minister of Culture in 2020. It includes the establishment of 153 new public libraries in various regions of the Kingdom by 2030, with the first 13 libraries slated to be completed by 2022.
As has occurred elsewhere across the world, biological diversity in some parts of Saudi Arabia experienced a revival during the stay-at-home period due to the decrease in logging, hunting, and off-road driving in areas of plant growth. Several environmental initiatives and virtual awareness programs were launched this year to maintain and spread awareness of these positive outcomes.

The Kingdom set out to establish its largest marine reserve, spanning an area of 5,373 square km including nine islands, in the Red Sea. Efforts are also underway to add Uruq Bani Ma’arid to the UNESCO World Heritage List, the first natural heritage site the Kingdom has nominated. Moreover, efforts have continued to register the Farasan Islands archipelago as the first Saudi nature reserve in the UNESCO Man and the Biosphere Programme.

Despite the ban on public gatherings and closure of nature reserves during the stay-at-home period, ecotourism activities had resumed by the middle of the year. Domestic tourism trips to natural or mountainous areas increased from 3.3% of all trips in 2019 to 4.2% in the first nine months of 2020. Several state-sponsored tourism initiatives have also been launched to boost environmental tourism, such as the Saudi Summer 2020 “Breathe” (Tanaffus) and “Winter Around You.”

Digital technologies play an expanding role in natural heritage conservation practices and policies. Despite the relatively recent utilization of digitalization in the field, the Uruq Bani Ma’arid serves as an exemplary model for what the sector in the Kingdom can achieve. Digitalization efforts have also facilitated the documentation of natural heritage and the creation of shareable and interactive online content to raise awareness of the cultural significance of natural sites.

Institutional and organizational developments in 2020 reflected a growing interest in environmental issues. The Ministry of Environment, Water, and Agriculture inaugurated five specialized centers responsible for protecting the environment and wildlife. These five centers are complemented by a new environmental fund that contributes to financial sustainability efforts within the sector. The Kingdom also became party to the Nagoya Protocol on Access to Genetic Resources and the Fair and Equitable Sharing of Benefits Arising from their Utilization to the Convention on Biological Diversity this year.
Food and Culinary Arts

- The Culinary Arts Commission was established and launched its strategy in 2020. 191 dishes were categorized in the ongoing inventory of traditional foods, 115 of which were recorded in Al-Madinah alone after the Commission launched a culinary arts documentation project there. In addition, several other initiatives emerged from the public and private sectors, resulting in the publication of a number of books on Saudi cuisine.

- The Covid-19 pandemic accelerated digital transformation in the restaurant sector. Most restaurants have moved to a delivery model. While some restaurants have created new offerings in line with health requirements, others have begun selling meal kits, which have allowed the sector to keep pace with the growing interest in culinary arts in the Kingdom.

- The cancellation or deferral of most culinary events were among the most prominent features of the culinary sector in 2020. Comparing the attendance figures for events that took place prior to the pandemic to others that took place subsequently reveals the extent to which the pandemic affected attendance at such events.

- The number of Saudis who reported working as general chefs was 1,523, accounting for only 2.44% of the total number of workers in the sector. Only 31 Saudi head chefs were reported, marking a slight increase over the past five years.

- As of 2020, there were 3,444 active enterprises registered for selling traditional foods and 2,374 registered as traditional cafes. The number of small family-owned online culinary businesses (locally dubbed the “productive families”) increased, with a total of 12,568 stores registered on the Maroof digital platform in the kitchen and bakery category. Several public and private initiatives were launched this year to support family-owned businesses.
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According to legal deposit statistics at King Fahad National Library, 8,497 new book titles were registered in 2020. Nevertheless, the publishing sector encountered logistical and financial challenges, including a limited publishing capacity. The percentage of books by first-time authors decreased this year, accounting for only 40% of the total titles. Moreover, the statistics reveal a low representation of titles by female authors.

Although translation initiatives saw significant activity in the Kingdom, the number of translated books has not kept pace with the total number of published titles: in 2020, 513 books were translated, down from 600 books translated on average each year over the last five years.

Online reading activities were popular as a way to deal with isolation and social distancing. These activities included initiatives in response to the pandemic as well as traditional book club activities held virtually. Likewise, institutions active in the field organized virtual events, including forums and online training courses.

While the publishing sector faced a number of difficulties in 2020, the biggest challenge was the cancellation of book fairs inside the Kingdom and beyond. These cancellations led to a drop in overall book sales, compounded by the closure of bookstores. Despite the increase in online book sales, this increase did not offset the financial impact of the loss of traditional sources of revenue for publishing houses.

Despite the challenges that the e-book industry still faces, there are positive indications for its potential growth. The Cultural Participation Survey reported that a quarter of respondents had read an e-book, and 80.64% of them had purchased e-books in the past. Data from the past two years also suggest that online book sales were growing even before the pandemic accelerated the pace of digitalization.

Developing the publishing and translation sectors falls under the mandate of The Literature, Publishing, and Translation Commission, established in 2020. In addition to developing these sectors, the commission is responsible for supporting translation and the publishing industry more broadly, improving professionalism, and regulating the sector’s markets.
Our culture, our identity