



German NGO Forum on
Environment and Development

Press release for 17 June 2005: World Day to Combat Desertification and Drought

Crucial desert resource neglected

Camels on rapid decline in Asia

The number of camels in Asia has fallen by one-fifth in the last ten years.

Statistics from the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations show that camel numbers dropped from 4.5 million in 1994 to 3.5 million in 2004. These figures count both the one-humped dromedaries and the two-humped Bactrian camels.

Dromedaries live in the hot deserts from the Mediterranean to the Thar Desert in western India.

Bactrians are adapted to the cold deserts of China, Mongolia and Central Asia. There are fewer than 600,000 Bactrian camels left.

A major reason for the startling drop in camel numbers is the loss of pasture land. More and more land is being fenced, irrigated and ploughed. Camel herders have nowhere for their animals to graze.

Making productive use of deserts

Camels are crucial to using deserts productively. They browse sparingly on the leaves of trees and bushes, so do not heavily damage the plants. Their soft, padded feet minimize erosion. They can go for many days without drinking, so can range far from water sources and use remote pastures.

Irrigation is often seen as a way to cause the desert to bloom. But it may have catastrophic effects: using salty groundwater and neglecting drainage can turn fertile soil into a wasteland. Camels offer a way to use this land: they like to eat salty plants, so can use areas that have been ruined for farming.

Camels have other benefits too. They produce milk even when it is very dry. Their meat is low in fat and cholesterol, and is recommended in Australia for heart patients. Camels can produce a wide range of health foods and lifestyle products.

Combating desertification

The United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification commits nations to tackle land degradation. Over 190 countries have ratified this convention.

At a recent meeting to review progress on implementing the Convention, delegate after delegate praised their countries' efforts, citing figures on how much money had been spent, how many trees were planted, and how communities had been involved in efforts to stem the spread of deserts.

But too many of these reports do not square with reality. Planting trees does not mean that they survive. Spending money does not mean it reaches the poor, or makes any difference on the ground.

The camel in India

India has seen one of the swiftest declines in camel numbers: 38% during the last decade, according to official figures. It is true that India has spent massive amounts of money and gone to extraordinary lengths to devolve responsibilities to local communities. But at the same time, the government supports irrigated agriculture by subsidizing power, fertilizer and high-yielding crops.

In the Thar Desert, a tribe of "tubewell nomads" has arisen. Farmers pump up groundwater to grow crops such as mustard and wheat. They can do this for a few years, until the groundwater level sinks below the reach of their pumps. They then they move on to the next spot. They leave behind barren, salty ground in place of the previous drought-resistant vegetation.

These tubewell nomads fence their fields with barbed wire to keep animals out. They shoot camels, or tied them up and allow them to starve.

Government agencies are also encroaching on former pasture land. The Forest Department prohibits access to traditional rangelands in the name of afforestation or conservation.

In the face of massive and progressive privatization of rangeland, it is not surprising that pastoralists are abandoning their hereditary profession. In a total break with traditional Hindu custom, entire herds of female camels are being sold for slaughter. They end up as meat on plates as far away as Bangladesh.

An option for using the desert without depleting the groundwater resources is being squandered. And the pastoralists' wealth of indigenous knowledge and practical experience that form the basis of camel production is disappearing.

Planting trees is not enough. Such activities must be coupled with policies that prevent land degradation, enable the sustainable use of arid lands, and take seriously the Convention on Combating Desertification's claim to value and promote traditional knowledge.

More information

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