

Reviving traditional desert assets

The camel is part and parcel of Rajasthan's culture and tradition. Once the greatest bulwark of desert people against the drought, this animal held a special place in their heart and even symbolised love.

But with the availability of motorized transport, preference of the government for irrigation agriculture, and "progress", camels came to be seen as backward and regarded as a threat by farmers. Over the last decade, camel numbers have dwindled by 50% and many thousands of female camels were even sold for slaughter.

With groundwater resources depleting and skyrocketing of fuel prices, the scenario is already changing and demand for camels appears on the increase. But besides being an eco-friendly source of energy, camels can provide a range of other products that fill modern consumer needs. It is time for a 21st century avatar of camel husbandry that combines traditional knowledge with cutting-edge modern science and production technology.

Camel products

Camel milk is truly the "white gold of the desert". Exceptionally high in Vitamin C and containing antimicrobial substances, it is a natural health food. It helps to keep diabetes at bay and research suggests that the antibodies in camels' milk can help fight diseases like cancer, HIV/AIDS, Alzheimer's and hepatitis C. The Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations (FAO) estimates that the global market in camel milk is worth \$10 billion.

Camel milk products include tea, coffee, *kulfi*, ice cream, *kheer*, and many other delicious specialties.

Camel leather items are popular with tourists, but currently these products are generally made from cheap goat leather. Genuine camel leather articles should be branded as such.

Camel bones have replaced ivory and are used for inlaid furniture and for jewellery.

Camel safaris are ideal for experiencing desert solitude in an eco-friendly manner and can provide the link to nature coveted by many urban people today.

Camels in the desert ecology

There is no animal in the world that is better suited to utilising desert environments in a sustainable manner. Ecologists studying the behaviour and grazing patterns of camels concluded that these animals actually keep desertification in check. Their soft-padded feet prevent erosion and their feeding habits can stimulate the growth of desert plants. Best of all, camels do not contribute the exploitation of groundwater – they can subsist entirely on the local drought resistant trees.

Once people start earning income from camel keeping, then they will invest in planting and protecting fodder trees. These trees bind the soil and, once they are established, they need no irrigation, providing a perfect solution to Rajasthan's dilemma of water shortages.

Such a process will not unfold automatically, but will require empowering camel breeding communities and creation of an enabling policy framework on the part of the government.



Project activities

This project seeks to promote and develop the potential of the camel for creating income in Rajasthan's desert areas in an ecologically sustainable manner. It will seek this aim through the following activities:

- Educate and raise awareness of traditional camel breeding communities about new marketing options.
- Support camel breeders in innovating their production systems
- Establish linkages with research institutes
- Liaise and lobby with government agencies for providing an appropriate policy framework
- Catalyze private sector involvement and investment in the manufacturing and marketing of camel products
- Strengthen camel breeders' organisation to retain ownership of production processes.
- Facilitate establishment of a common platform for all stakeholders in the camel.



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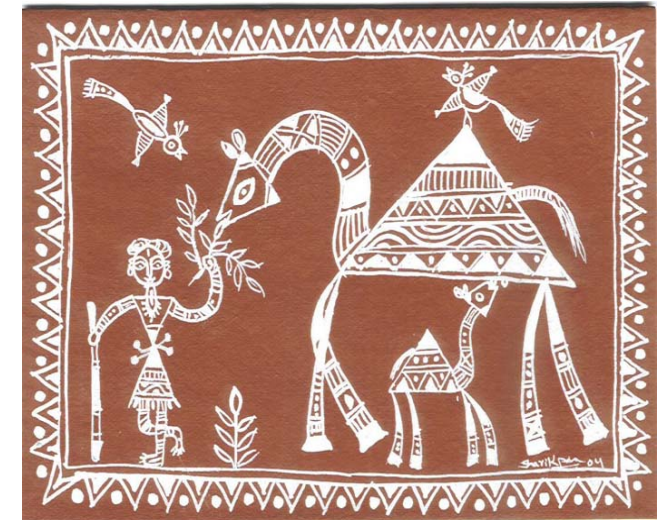
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Cashing in on desert products

Reviving Rajasthan's camel husbandry



Lokhit Pashu-Palak Sansthan (LPPS)