

AAINews

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The Camel's Lesson

I was given a chance to stay and work in Oman for almost one year starting from September 1998. My workplace was an experimental station in the middle of the desert, and I was living in the town of Salalah. When I was thinking about the vegetation improvement of the mountain areas around Salalah, I had some occasions to contemplate the issues of development assistance. Let me start with an episode about the mountains. When I visited the Japanese Embassy in Oman, one of the embassy staff who had just started working there, told me about some green landscape which he had seen on TV. The scenery was covered with such green vegetation that he thought it could be somewhere in Japan, but actually, to his surprise, the footage had been shot in Oman itself. The landscapes he'd seen on TV were the mountains of the Dhofar region in the southern part of Oman. The town of Salalah is in the center of the Dhofar region, and I was actually living near the landscape which had so amazed him, and indeed which had amazed me to no less extent.

Why is there such a green area? It is almost like a different world. The answer is that this area is blessed with a unique climate thanks to the monsoon, which brings moist air from the Indian Ocean from July through to September. The heavy air carried by the monsoon in turn brings rains and mists when it reaches the mountains. During that period the weather around Salalah becomes cool, and many people come here from the capital Muscat and from neighbouring Gulf States (Saudi Arabia, UAE, Qatar etc.) to spend the summer. They enjoy picnics under the clouds or in the drizzle. For those who live in desert environments such weather is something special and even pleasurable.

However, in this mountain area the depletion of vegetation due to overgrazing (by cows, goats and camels) is becoming increasingly a problem in recent years. Despite the fact that today camels are becoming less and less important livestock animals as an income source, 1994 data show that in this mountain area there are some 47,000 camels, not to mention 147,000 cows, 89,000 goats (see "Agriculture in Dhofar (3)" in AAINews Vol.15). The first solution we would think of to this problem is to reduce the number of camels for the protection of the vegetation. However, for the local people camels are property, and more than anything, they love their camels. Speaking personally, although at first I was interested in camels I do not have a particularly good impression of these animals now; they often stand immobile in the middle of the road and are never scared away by car horns, their meat is tough and has a strong smell, and their milk is lighter and saltier than cow milk. One day I asked one of our counterpart workers why he kept camels rather than cows. His first answer was "Camels are lovely". There then followed a description of camel behavior and habits. Since he had a car he would not need camels for transportation, and it seemed that camels had absolutely no practical use for him. But he continues to keep his camels even today. The people say they love camels and it is an age-old custom to keep camels. For them life with camels is something quite natural. Understanding this sort of thing as abstract knowledge is one thing, but feeling it on the spot is quite another.

We would like to help them tackle the problem of vegetation depletion by grasping the situation objectively, while keeping in mind their profound love for camels. In fact, unless we can take the local peoples' feelings into consideration as much as possible, our assistance activities will not be sustainable. My wish is that the pleasure of having a picnic in the misty and green landscape will always be an opportunity for the people of the desert. (By Iiyama in Salalah, October 1999)



Hills covered with green



Milking a camel