

## Changes in Pastoral Society in Syria and Resource Management

### Part 6: Prospects for future resource management

In 2002, I had a chance to visit Syria after five and a half years away and conduct field work in the Jebal Abd al Aziz (JAA) mountains. The purpose of the field work was to assess the potential of a participatory rural development project involving the Baqqaras. However in JAA, as discussed in this series, the legacy of the systematic grassland landscape created by human activities had disappeared, and further vegetation changes were obvious. The particular grassland distribution patterns had been slowly created over 40 years, marking man's pastoral and firewood collection activities as the livestock herders, mainly the Baqqaras, became increasingly sedentary. This landscape had been totally destroyed.

The major reason for the destruction of grassland in JAA was the national government's tree planting project that started around 1979 in the surrounding area of the JAA and gradually expanded its project area. After the late 1990s, as a result of accelerated tree planting activities, the traditional grassland utilization by pastoralists saw a major change, confining the pastoralists in the particular and limited areas excluded from the tree planting activities. Traditionally, there was a clear demarcation of living space between sub-tribes based on the social norm. However, there was an excessive concentration of people and livestock in places, as the areas for their activities became increasingly limited and overlapped. The marked over-grazing caused the recession and degradation of grassland vegetation. At the same time, when we looked at conservation areas with tree plantations, almost all the planted tree species such as pines and pistachio had dried out due to insufficient management such as watering after planting. After having eliminated the pressure on mountain vegetation that was posed by lifestyle of pastoralists, weedy shrubs quickly dominated the area. Excessive overgrowth of the shrubs does not only prevent tree species from growing, but also creates a situation susceptible to natural disasters such as wildfires which commonly occur during the dry season in summer.

Consequently, the grassland in JAA was transformed into two contrasting and extreme vegetation types; i.e. over grazed and over grown areas. Is it impossible for the two different land uses based on totally different ideologies, namely livestock husbandry and tree plantation, to coexist? As far as seen from today's situation in JAA, one cannot say either of the land uses is successful, and both of them together seem to have hit a dead end. We keenly realise the difficult nature of tree planting activities in arid areas, especially when such activities are rather forcefully implemented in the space which pastoralists utilise. Fifty years ago, the Baqqaras had to overcome the hardship inflicted on them by the expansion of cultivated areas and reduced grazing land, by adapting their lifestyles to the new resources available. They are currently on the edge, waiting to see whether their livestock based livelihoods can be sustained alongside the expansion of protected tree planting areas. If they are to continue with livestock husbandry living within sedentary communities, the only way forward is to explore the directions of a more intensive livestock farming rather than pastoralism. This would probably require them to obtain some excess farming produce from neighbouring farming villages as supplementary fodder. For firewood collection, it should be possible for the activity to coexist with afforestation if the weeding of thick shrubs is considered. An urgent future task is to effectively involve local residents in resource management after tree planting so as to establish a cooperative system at the field level.

Furthermore, the following may be true. The Baqqaras, through long years of living in the JAA, have accumulated plenty of knowledge and experience regarding the grassland vegetation as their livelihood resource. Because of this, as discussed in previous parts of this series, they did not just use vegetation indiscriminately. Rather they selected and evaluated grassland as livestock herders, and as a result, an orderly grassland vegetation scenery is considered to have been formed. When we talk about "resource management", we often imagine processing satellite images or creating resource maps such as a vegetation map using GIS. If we call this the "external eyes" of resource management, it will be increasingly important for better understanding of regional vegetation, to view resource management in a compound fashion, incorporating the "internal eyes" of local residents. In future, if I have another chance to work in JAA, I would like to tackle tasks through resource management from a pastoralists' view of grassland vegetation; in other words, from the Baqqaras' ethno-botanical view and understanding of the grasslands.



Grassland vegetation in the mid 1990s



Artemisia herba-albe which withered due to overgrazing



Tree plantation conservation area: Pinus spp. six years after planting and overgrown shrubs