

## Revisiting Oman

Since the mangrove project in Oman was completed, I have not visited the country for some time. However, recently I had an opportunity to pay a short visit and therefore would like to discuss Oman again in AAI News. When I first visited the country in 1989, I could enter Oman from the neighboring UAE by car and move around the country freely. I visited many oases along the coastal areas and inlands. In particular, in the small oasis among the mountains, I remember having been impressed by how each date palm tree was well taken care of by the farmers. At the bottom of individual trees, livestock dung was carefully placed, and canals and water basins seemed to have been well maintained. The picturesque scenery of date palm farms remains vividly in my memory. It was also surprising that Omani farmers themselves climb up the tall trees and prune them without relying on foreign laborers.

My second visit was in 1997. It was a very rare occasion - all the AAI staff gathered in Muscat. Based on the discussion that time, we established the Muscat Fund, which has been used as a means for our "NGO-like" activities supporting grassroots initiatives. I visited the country a third time in 2003 participating as a GIS specialist in the development study the mangrove reforestation project. My good memory from the third visit was the full days I spent with the GIS staff of the Ministry of Regional Municipalities, Environment and Water Resources. The GIS section had staff from Balochistan as well as from Zanzibar. In addition to Arabic, Urdu and Swahili were often heard in the rooms. As I had spent many years in Dubai, Kenya and Tanzania, I felt very relaxed here. Looking at Dhows in the Mathura Harbor and walking around the Souk, one could feel the ancient trading history from India to Zanzibar, and this is one of the attractions of Oman.

This time, my stay was for one month from February to March, and I could enjoy the best season in the year. I could also visit Jabal Akhdar which I had never been fortunate enough to visit earlier. Jabal Akhdar means green mountains and I could see vividly green terraced fields on the slopes of the dry mountains. This made me really understand what their name derived from. During the visit, an alumni gathering for ex-JICA participants was held. The meeting was attended by 20-30 people, including ex-participants, embassy staff and JICA staff, and an attractive program was prepared. When we gathered at a small marina, a video introducing Japan and another video introducing Oman were shown at the start of the event. The Omani video was produced by the Ministry of Tourism, and featured the beautiful nature of Oman showing deserts and the ocean. After watching the videos, we went on a 1.5-hour cruise, enjoying the views of beach resorts from the sea and observing coral reef ecosystems on a glass-bottom boat. Then we sailed to the off-shore area and enjoyed dolphin watching. We could really experience part of what was introduced in the video. After the cruise, we had a lunch at the marina and exchanged information. It was a short alumni gathering but very rich in content.

Oman was always one of my favorite countries, but with this visit, I have grown even more affectionate towards the place. That is because I could really see and feel everywhere the zealotness of Omani people to develop their own country. Oman is about to graduate from ODA, and will move into forging equal partnerships with countries such as Japan. With this in mind, AAI would like to contribute to implementation of a new type of cooperation activities that are appropriate to the post-ODA era, making the most of cooperative relationships and personal connections which we have nurtured in the past years. (Feb. 2010 by Hiroyasu Onuma)



Mathura's Harbor and souk bustling with tourists



Oasis of the inland town of Nizwa



Terraced fields in Al Jabal al Akhdar