

Al Jabal al Akhdar – Oasis farming systems in Northern Oman

The Ph. D. student Uta Dickhöfer and Postdoc Katja Brinkmann of the University of Kassel introduced the group from a perspective view into the oases system of the Al Jabal al Akhdar mountain range. After introducing the climatic, agricultural and socio-economic conditions of the oases we discussed the situation and focussed opportunities and threats of this agricultural system. Afterwards we realised the harsh conditions by a walk through the terrace gardens.

Along the scenic gorge west of the Sayq plateau, oases systems are bedded in the rock face. The coarse conditions especially the limiting factor water, forced the people to settle and farm along the gorge where water is available. Water flows out of the rocks and is kept and guided in open channels (*Falaj*) to the fields and households of the oases villages. The location of the terraces, the distance from the well and households, indicates the value of the terraces. According to the seasonal supply of water, decisions are made what kind of crops are cultivated and where those crops are cultivated.

The oases are connected by small trails. Social exchanges among the oases communities take place during weddings, funerals and other festivals.

Terrace farming systems

Mixed farming systems of field crops, rose shrubs and fruit trees characterise the terraces of the Ash Sharayjah community. Small scale farmers mainly produce on fields with less than 1ha, food for home consumption or fodder grasses for their livestock such as goats, cows, chicken and sheep. The goats are fed in the morning and evening with own produced fodder like oats, barley and even lower class dates or fodder which is bought on the Nizwa market. During the day they are taken out to feed on the natural vegetation in the area around the villages.

The fields are cultivated nearly year around with different crops and fruit trees such as garlic, reddish, wheat, almonds, apricots, grapes, lime, peaches, pomegranates and walnuts.

Late March the *Rosa damascena* turns the terraces into blooming and fragrant gardens. The roses flowers are picked before sunrise by women while the men distillate the rose fragrant and produce rosewater.

Another well known product of the Al Jabal al Akhdar are the pomegranates which start to bloom late March. The majority of the fruits are sold in the summer on the Nizwa market and reach prices up to 1 OMR (~1,96 €). Al Jabal al Akhdar pomegranates are a very well known and valuable product by the Omani people.

The farmers of the terrace villages reach 30-50% income with their agricultural products. Today hard work and traditional knowledge does not pay off for living expenses. As a result some family members work during the weeks in cities like Muscat to finance the families in the villages. Due to the higher off farm income the farmers abandoned their land and concentrate on other living opportunities. Other farmers, who can financially effort it, hire workers from Bangladesh or Pakistan who do the hard farming work in the terraces.

Still a privilege to the Omani men is the irrigation of the fields and the distillation of the rose fragrant.

Tourism and consequences to the oasis community

Along the access road to the Sayq plateau, signs for “Don’ts and suitable behaviour” towards the people in the villages try to clear up the visitors behaviour in this unique area. Due to cultural and religious misunderstanding, problems with tourists arose while they intruded privacy, the traditional, cultural and religious life of the inhabitants especially of the women, went into the gardens and stole the valuable fruits. As a consequence the village people complained to the government that too many tourists are wandering in the villages and gardens. An opportunity to face these problems and to take an advantage of tourism could be a well established ecotourism concept where the people and the environment benefit from tourism. Endeavours of ecotourism strategies could introduce foreigners to this distinctive and vulnerable area.

The visit of the oasis clarified the unique agricultural systems and traditional living in the oasis. Facing the *status quo* and problems, the oases are in a transformation process. Due to socio-economic changes traditional farming and irrigating knowledge may get lost. Climatic changes could also introduce problems in the future due a reduced availability of water.

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