

Sinai Journey Report November 2019

Makhad
People Spirit Environment



St Katherine's and the new AstroTurf football pitch



*Helen Cranston
Project Manager*

***News from Sinai,
Wells Project,
Orphan Herb
Project, and The
Carpentry School***

The News

Just a week before this trip there were heavy rains in a few areas of South Sinai, including Wadi Zuweitin, Wadi El Mather, Wadi Shaq, Wadi Buleia and Wadi Gebal, which to those who know, are areas where our dams are and many of the gardens we have helped to restore. Nearly all our dams have water in them for the second time this year! Garden owners in the area are very happy, knowing there will be sufficient water, even until next spring, for them to plant up their gardens. Unfortunately, Wadi Gharba, just outside the ring of high granite mountains surrounding Mt Sinai, did not get any rain, so it is now 4 years since they have had some. The rain was so localised that the town of St Katherine's also missed out. People are hoping that there will be more rain this winter.

After the excitement of the proposed visit of President Sisi and all the preparations for it, he did not come! The Festival 'Let's Pray Together' was held as usual and many senior government ministers came as well as ambassadors and honoured guests so it was successful. Now the town of St Katherine's is quiet and peaceful again, and quite a bit less shabby. One very visible addition to the town is a brand new turf surface for the football pitch. It is of course, artificial grass and will make it a lot more comfortable for people to play on. A local school got some artificial turf too, for their school pitch. The turf was laid in strips and there were some surplus pieces that have ended up in unlikely places. A few cars have plastic grass mats on their dashboards and some trees in Fox Camp have acquired lurid green trunks.

The weather is turning cold here at night, though the days are still warm in the sun but winter is coming. Inflation will be hitting people hard this winter though. Butane gas cylinders, used for cooking, have increased in price by over 800% in the last year, and electricity prices have risen too. Some people will not be able to afford to heat their homes, and with winter temperatures frequently below zero, this will not be pleasant nor good for people. Poverty in Sinai is an ever increasing problem.

Well Stories



The children in this photograph have been digging this well from scratch mostly by themselves and it is now 12 m deep! This seems an extraordinary thing for them to be doing but less so when you know the context.

They live in Wadi Gharba, an area where they have not had proper rain for over four years! They have seen how their mothers struggle to cope with such little water given by their wells and wanted to do something about it. A wise Bedouin water man told them that there would be water in this place, not far from their houses. They had all helped with a well before, when another community well was dug a few hundred yards away, one that

became a community effort to complete it so they knew what to do. However the previous time they had acted as runners and helped at the top of the well. This time, the eldest boy, who is 14, is the digger and the others help at the top with hauling up buckets. The girl does her part too by bringing tea and refreshments to the team. The work has been undertaken on a daily basis after they finish school and they are very proud of their work. So far they have not reached the water but the sand they are bringing out is damp so they hope they are close.

It is one thing, and a brave thing to dig out a well. It is another to be able to finish it with lining bricks and cement, hoses, a strong wall around it to protect it from possible floods and a pump but neither they nor the community can afford all that, so they are asking for our help. It is our policy not to aid new wells as they are unproven and may not have water, so we only help established wells. We would like to help these children, to reward them for their hard work and persistence and need a sponsor, or sponsors who are prepared to take a small risk with their donation to pay for all the finishing off, which will be the same cost as all the wells. Do get in touch if you want to help.

Sayeid Sbael Selim has a garden in Wadi Itlah, but his well had little water. He was very keen to have a productive garden for his family in the nearby community of Abu Sila. When we made the first site visit 2 years ago, they had planted up some small trees and ‘borrowed’ water from their neighbours to keep them going. In September we gave him his first payment and now his garden is transformed! He has restored his well by deepening the well and then lining it with bricks. The well now gives them 1.5 cubic meters of water a day which is enough for all the trees and for vegetables and herbs. We



We reached the garden at lunch time and can vouch for the wonderful rocket, and cucumbers, while we could see there had been lots of tomatoes, aubergines, beans, courgettes and lots more. He is growing many herbs too, both culinary and medicinal. Sayeid is a young man but very interested in

the garden. He is caretaker for all his family of ten people. The first photograph above, shows the garden and well before the work, and the last one shows the garden looking more like a jungle! This is one of the greenest gardens we have seen anywhere!





Mohamed Hassan has one of the largest gardens of any of the Bedouin. He lives in Sheikh Awad, a small community by Wadi Gharba, and where there has been no proper rain for four years. Despite having severe curvature of the spine since childhood, he manages his garden of over 100 trees very well. Because this is at a lower altitude, he can grow oranges, lemons and dates as well as olives, apples and pears. The well in his garden had gone dry a long time ago and he was getting some water from a well just up the valley but it was drying out too and he had been ‘borrowing’ water from his neighbour, which is really unsatisfactory for both but Bedouin always help each other out. With the first payment, Mohamed organised men to dig out his well but they found really tough granite which was hard to dig through. He was concerned about wasting the money with further unproductive digging, so when someone from the community suggested he try digging out the old well instead, they changed tack. They dug out 12 m of sand, gravel and granite and found that the old well now produced an astonishing 10 cubes of water each day. This is easily enough

for the whole garden and for people in the community who are coming with their cars to collect water for drinking too. Mohamed had to spend quite a bit more on his well than we gave him but he was prepared to do this by selling his olive harvest to help pay for it.

During this trip we found that 14 wells had been completed, including some wells that have been in progress for a long time.

Well Statistics as at 27 November 2019

22	Completed	Underway	Waiting Sponsor	Waiting List
Garden Wells	236	7	25	174+62 = 236
Community Wells	240	9	48	143+56 = 199
Totals	476	16	73	435

The Carpentry School

The carpentry school is awaiting the start of the next phase of teaching which will be based around using electric tools. The catch here is that Ahmed needs a 5-in-1 electric carpentry machine which fulfils multiple functions of sawing, planing and thicknessing, routing, sanding, turning. He is happy to find a second-hand machine which are available from the souqs of Cairo (where it seems you can find anything in the world but especially old equipment) but it will still be a considerable cost as far as the Trust is concerned. We are looking to raise £4,500 to buy the machine, transport it and have it installed. Any contributions to the 5-in-1 Carpentry Machine Fund, however, small, would be much appreciated.



Orphan Herb Project - 2nd Course

At the beginning of October, Slim, our herbalist teacher, started to teach a new cohort of students. The 12 children range in age from eight to around fourteen and they were selected as they have all



been bereaved by losing their fathers. Two fathers died in motorcycle accidents and others of heart attacks. Life is very difficult for these orphans, even though they still have their mothers.

Most of the students this time, come from communities in or near the town of St Katherine's and rarely go into the mountains or know the local area. Some of the students said that they didn't know the difference between any plants growing around them before the course.

After two months of a couple of lessons a week, in an adapted garden close by, the students have learnt about around 25 different herbs.

They can identify them and know which ones

are poisonous (essential information if you are gathering wild herbs). They know how to cut them to preserve the plants, how to transport the herbs so as not to damage them and a little about their properties. The course will last two years with these students as there is a lot to learn. They also take notes and write about the herbs which is good practise as apparently they do not write much in school! Everyone here complains about the standard of education taught, so this course will be useful extra tuition, covering biology, botany, geography, chemistry, and herbal medicine.

Slim is also working with student doctors from Cairo, who learn the theory of herbal medicine and how to use it during their training but there is no practical teaching. The student doctors come to St Katherine's to learn to identify the herbs and how to use them in a practical sense. Slim also sends herb seeds gathered from the mountains to a university in Cairo and also to a seed gene bank. We are very pleased he is finding the time to teach the children as well and seems to enjoy it very much.

Beekeeping and the Carpentry School

The Beekeeping Training project is on hold for a while, subject to assessing the impact on the local flora and fauna. We will make a decision about future courses in the autumn next year. There are many Bedouin who would love to keep bees, and Salam has a long waiting list of potential students for the course so we hope all will be well.

Winter Social



The annual gathering of friends and supporters of the Makhad Trust will take place on Sunday 19 January with a delicious Sunday Lunch at The Bear of Rodborough near Stroud in Gloucestershire. After meeting in the bar we will sit down to a three course lunch (there is a choice of main dishes as well as at least two roast meat dishes), for around £23.95. After lunch we will take a stroll around Minchinhampton Common, weather depending, or chat over tea or coffee in the lounge. This is a chance to meet our trustees and hear the latest news on our projects 'from the horse's mouth' and ask questions!

If you are interested in joining us for this relaxed gathering, please email Helen to book you a place at the table. helencranston@makhad.org

Future Journeys

With the announcement of the resumption of direct flights to Sharm El Sheikh next year, it will be much easier and hopefully a great deal cheaper for participants to come on Makhad working Journeys again. Until we know the times of flights it is difficult to plan the next journey but as soon as we know we will send out details. Maybe there will even be two journeys in 2020!

Not everyone is lured by the idea of hard labour building a dam (though actually it isn't really very hard) and some might find it too strenuous, so if there is enough interest we can plan a different sort of journey that would involve visiting some of the gardens, meeting garden owners and getting to know the beautiful mountains of Sinai. If you are interested in our journeys, then do write to us to tell us - see the contact details below.

Our Anchor Men in Sinai

The Makhad Trust could not operate at all if it were not for the hard work, dedication and total loyalty of our Sinai Manager **Mahmoud Ahmed**. Mahmoud is from one of the tribes we work with, the Jebeliya, and was born in St Katherine's. He worked for many years as a tourist guide and so he knows the whole area extremely well. His English is excellent, and he is totally trustworthy. He knows the local gossip and news, and advises how best to run the project - from which areas need more water, to which well owners would complete any contract we might make. He knows whom we can trust and who to avoid and he manages to stay neutral while at the same time participating in the very close-knit social life of the tribe and his community. Without him, we would struggle to have any working projects. In between visits by the UK Project Manager, Mahmoud visits completed well projects in annual rotations to check the wells are working as intended and if there are problems, he sits in on lessons for the beekeeping project and the orphan herb project and the carpentry school. He liaises with the other Bedouin project providers and keeps the UK team up to date and informed of potential problems. He looks after the dams and people coming on dam journeys too. He supports our UK trustees whenever they come to Sinai, giving us a secure base from which to work. His job takes him all over the wider area, and into the mountains which he loves.



Faraj Fox is also from the Jebeliya tribe and was born in St Katherine's. He runs one of several backpacking camps in St Katherine's, organising trips to the mountains for tourists. However his role in the community is much more important. He has become the chief liaison and mediator between the three tribes here, and the security services (and often acts as intermediary with the 8 tribes of South Sinai). He knows almost everything that is going on and is always available to help anyone in trouble, which keeps him very busy. An example of his role in the community came while we were working together.

Most of the pickups are too old, tatty or illegally welded together to qualify for a licence and so are just driven locally, mostly off road. However occasionally a driver will be found by the police and arrested. It is Faraj who liaises over release and smooths ruffled feathers on both sides. When he hears of a family struggling without enough food to eat, he liaises with the Army for emergency rations to be sent and he delivers them. A recent event illustrates this.

As we were driving out of Fox Camp one day, a pickup arrived with three men in it - and a load of tree trunks. A brief conversation ensued and we drove on. Faraj said that there had been an

accident with a bedouin pickup hitting a camel. The camel's owner was content with compensation and the pickup was largely undamaged. However the police had become involved and had impounded the vehicle. They said a motor engineer must come from Dahab on the coast, to check over the vehicle and ensure it is road worthy. They also seemed to want to charge the driver for hitting the camel. The problem is that the communities here are so cash poor that they don't have spare money for unexpected eventualities. The man had been to gather wood from gardens to sell to raise the money to pay for the motor engineer to come, and they also needed Faraj's help



to smooth the way with the police so he would not be charged which would have incurred more costs. Such an event is frequent and often takes many hours and sometimes the odd goat feast to keep the security forces happy! The police and senior army officers are known for their appetites. However there is usually a happy outcome for the Bedouin concerned due to Faraj's commitment and generosity with his time.

Contact the Makhad Trust

If you would like more information about any of our projects or about the Trust in general, we would love to hear from you.

The Makhad Trust,
Wolseley House, Oriel Road, Cheltenham, GL50 1TH
01242 544546
www.makhad.org

Contact info@makhad.org or helencranston@makhad.org

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