

Sinai Journey Report October 2019

Makhad
People Spirit Environment



Mahmoud climbing up from a visit to one of our wells in the magnificent landscape of Wadi Esbaia



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

The News

The countdown to the Annual International Religious Festival “Let’s Pray Together” has begun in earnest. At the time of writing, it is 16 days away, and is the fifth time St Katherine’s has been host, with this year promising to be the biggest and best, with an illustrious guest. The President, General Sisi, is coming to attend the event held on the large plain in front of the Wadi Raha hotel at the entrance to St Katherine’s. With just two weeks to go, the stage area is already being prepared and the daily sound of lorries and big plant moving earth around has been going on from dawn until late evening. Many other places are getting a facelift too, the mosque has a new coat of paint, the abandoned post office building and empty Telecom buildings by the Bakery (that is the spelling on the board outside it), have been transformed with new signs and marble steps and handrails. The security checkpoints here in St Katherine’s and at the junction with the Wadi Ferian road (the only other road out of here after the Sharm road) are getting new white-painted concrete barriers to replace the old battered oil drums and piles of assorted rocks. The welcome arches are having yet another rebuild too. The army has been in the process of building a new petrol station at the big junction for months, but in the last 10 days, it has miraculously gone from a skeleton to acquiring signs and paint on the outside. The lampposts have had the makeover treatment with strings of white and blue fairy lights in a curl around the top of the posts. The overall effect is more nightclub than mountain town but it is quite pretty. Some of the lampposts have even had their access doors wired shut so the messy tangles of bare live wires no longer stick out to snag at an unwary passerby. No doubt there is more still to be done during this ‘no expense spared’ makeover. When President Sisi comes, there will be no local traffic allowed in the town, only official cars, and there will undoubtedly be a very heavy security presence. Some Bedouin have remarked that it would be a good time to tend their gardens in the mountains.

Another set of events that happen at this time of year are weddings. We went to see one well which entails a 7km walk only to find that the well owner was at the wedding further along the valley and not likely to be able to attend the well. Mahmoud and I walked the 7km back to meet up with Faraj having had an energetic day with a lovely scenic walk and only one earlier well visit to

show for it! Weddings are such big family occasions that the whole village/wadi/extended family turn out for it. This is partly because families offset the huge cost of a wedding by combining marriages of several couples at one event. Mahmoud explained that when he and his wife Kerima got married there were 4 other couples marrying at the same time. As they usually come from related families this does cut down on the total number of weddings to attend as well, as there are many of them!

While UK was enjoying unusually warm weather for the middle of September, Sinai was experiencing unusually hot weather too. We happened to be in the high mountains when it came and it is usually cooler in the gardens but we were all struggling with the heat. We stayed the night at Hussein's garden in Wadi Zuweitin, where many of our journeys have been and he was surprised that the temperatures seemed to be exceeding even mid-summer ones. Fortunately the cool mountain winds started blowing again after a few days.

We were pleased to welcome a guest on this trip. John Hill had been on a Makhad Trust retreat 8 years ago and then brought many people to join 3 dam journeys. This time he came to see the project side of the trust. As a professional gardener he was very keen to explore more of the Bedouin gardens and in particular find out more about their grafting skills. Our well visits took us to Dr Ahmed and we had a lovely visit to his excellent garden, sampling lots of his produce including grapes, tomatoes, cucumbers, and rocket.



As John departed for home, we were joined by our Chair of Trustees Michael Ratcliffe and our Egyptair Trustee Sherif Samra, who set up our sister organisation, The Nuwamis Development Society. They had come to support the legal and administrative aspects of our work. They also brought Dr Salah, a university lecturer and expert in NGO's and administration. Michael had had the inspiration to suggest to a select gathering of Bedouin, that they form a cooperative, with Dr Salah's help. One of the roles of the coop could be to apply for small scale Egyptian government grants to help with purchase of equipment such as an olive press. Once the Bedouin saw the

potential for the formation of their cooperative, the ideas soon grew as ways to help their community grew and grew. Another role could be to act as a retailer and transporter of garden produce to Cairo. The sky is the limit, as they say.

Well Stories

Since the beginning of this project, the Bedouin who are associated with each well have been referred to as well owners. It was not until a chance remark by a visitor, asking why the Bedouin don't sell their water from their well, that I thought more about this. At the time, I answered by saying that a Bedouin would never dream of charging for the water, they say they don't own it, it belongs to everyone and water comes from the God. A conversation with Mahmoud established that a better expression than 'well owners' would be well custodians or *Wasi* in Bedouin



Arabic. The responsibility for a well is passed on down the family line and it is the responsibility of the custodian to ensure that water is available to whoever needs it.

This tradition has been part of Bedouin culture for many centuries and is part of what it takes to survive in the desert. There is a code of honour and hospitality that says a Bedouin in the desert will always provide water, food and shelter to anyone who needs it for 3 days, even if the man is his greatest enemy. However after 3 days, and once the man has left, then tribal rivalries and feuds are reinstated.

This central modus operandi seems universal amongst all Bedouin from wherever they come from. No matter how poor, a Bedouin would never consider selling water from the well he is custodian of.

El Ramthy and water. This area out in the desert has featured in the last report. There were 20 wells at the confluence of two huge wadis, plus many more in the surrounding area, which were all flooded about 4 years ago. Most of the communities gardens depended on the wells and the lack of water caused nearly all their trees to die. The first priority was to restore drinking water to this large community of semi-nomadic Bedouin. After restoring 13 wells there is enough drinking water that they can start to think about gardens now.

Where there is water to spare this year they are growing Bedouin tobacco which is real tobacco, not its illicit relative. The young men in the photo are chopping the leaves into pieces for drying before being sold. They should get a good price for this and it represents one of the easiest cash crops they can grow, so it is important in these impoverished communities. The desert looks a lot greener now as the dried-up gardens have been planted vegetables too and the trees are recovering well. They intend to plant lots more orchard trees in the gardens this winter too. It is wonderful to see this area become the focus for life once again.



Water for new communities



We discovered a new community struggling with water during this visit. We had made a first sight visit and then first payment for the restoration of a drinking well for Abu Emgrayradt but had not visited the community. We found there are 35 families with just two wells producing very little water. The government water truck (which has to be paid for) does not come here either so they have no washing water. At the moment they have to drive to Tarfa village where there is little enough for the residents there as this area has had no rain for over 2 years. One well is now producing good water and we hope to start their other well soon. They also want to explore

digging a new well in the wadi below the village and will consult a Bedouin water man to see if this is a likely solution to their problem.



El Kabasha well is finally completed!

This well got a mention last time as I have been visiting it every trip for the last year. Progress has been painfully slow. It is over a year since this well was started, but they have finally completed it and now have 2m of water and it refills quickly. This small community had little access to fresh drinking water without a long drive, and it was hard work to get the water for people and goats before. We were very pleased to see this one completed.

We also visited a large community a long way out from St K, in Wadi Slav. We had given them the first payment in June and when we visited them this time, the well was completed! Wells in this area are deep at around 50m. The well was 51m and gave good water but a huge government dam built in a wadi above here had caused the walls in this well to cave in and collapse. There was 10m of sand and silt here in addition to the damaged walls of the well. They dug out the sand and the collapsed walls, dug the well deeper and then rebuilt the walls and made them strong enough to withstand the higher water levels when the dam fills. The well is now 54m deep but we couldn't see the bottom. Fifteen families use this well for drinking and it supports a garden too so it is crucial for this community. There are many families living here, about 40 minutes from the nearest tarmac road and over an hour from the nearest town. Alternative sources of water are a long drive away, so we hope to be able to help more wells in this area in future.



Current Well Statistics

We have just passed the 450 point - wells restored - and now look towards a target of 500 for next year!

	Completed	Underway	Waiting Sponsor	Waiting List
Garden Wells	231	8	27	176 + 54 =230
Community Wells	230	14	49	144 +53 + 197
Totals	461	22	76	427

Beekeeping

Selim our Beekeeping teacher has reported that it has been an excellent summer for the new beekeeping students, and in fact for all his past students too. The rains in February have brought lots of flowers and wild herbs and the bees have plenty of pollen to collect. This year's students have learnt from previous ones and were better prepared to combat ants, beekeepers and lizards. There was only one hive lost and that was due to it being dropped while the hives were being moved. All the bees escaped from the damaged hive. Last year's students, who struggled so hard with lack of water and the consequent lack of flowering plants due to the drought, made up for it this year. Some had bought extra swarms and some had split a couple of their own swarms so they were all back up to capacity. The honey is excellent quality this year and much is being sold for 400le or 500le a kilo. However one beekeeper student, Salem Ramadan, has his bees in Wadi Arbaeen where there are lots of olive trees and a huge variety of herbs. His honey is so highly prized that he is selling it for 600le a kilo (£30)! All the honey is reported to have medicinal properties but Salem's is especially good. This was the fourth course and now we are taking pause for a year to consider the impact and implications of introducing honey bees in the area.



Carpentry School

The students have completed their basic training now and it was time to recognise their achievements. Faraj, Eid, Kharlid 1, Kharlid 2 and Mousa, all received a certificate, a carpenters apron, and two pin badges with the new logo for the school in Arabic and a of set hand tools. They all looked so proud in their new aprons. They have already been doing some basic carpentry work



in the community. Some had fitted doors or windows and some had repaired furniture.

The next stage of this enterprise is to teach the students how to use electric tools. Ahmed has an ambitious plan which centres on the provision of a large 5-in-1 carpentry machine that will saw, plane, thickness and more. Once they have this equipment, the students will be able to build and make anything out of wood. This is going to need a serious amount of funding but is critical to the completion of training of this first cohort of students. We would be grateful to anyone who wishes to support the Carpentry School and donate to the cost of the machine, which will be

around £4500. We hope there will be many more students taking their places in future.

Orphan Herb Growing Project



Slim, the teacher, started a new course with 11 new pupils in August. This time the children come from St Katherines town and from Raha and most of the children have never spent time in the mountains so they have a lot to learn. Slim also brings children from the first course with him to help with teaching and to introduce the new students to the plants, the wildlife and wider landscape in which they live. Only a generation ago, all the children would have spent time, mostly the summers, living in the mountains with their parents, tending gardens. Now we don't often see town children in the mountain gardens and it is a great shame that this part of the cultural heritage is being lost. Slim's Herb Growing Course will be helping to keep alive this cultural connection with the landscape. They are working from a garden that belongs to Faraj Fox and he has given it to the project. It is a few hundred meters behind Fox Camp in Wadi Shreesh. All the children have lost their fathers and some are brother and sister to each other. They all have a lot to gain from the support this course brings to them and from the other

children who have already passed through and who are continuing to tend their herb gardens.

NDC project with the Bedouin Women of St K

Our sister organisation has continued to work with the Bedouin women of St Katherines, supporting them to realise their business dreams. We met two of the young women, one of whom is starting up a curtain making business and the other is starting a Bedouin food cafe. The project is supported by a German NGO called Mit Ost. They are now facilitating a second course with more Bedouin women and will select the 4 most promising projects to take forward. There was huge enthusiasm for this project from the Bedouin women. Unfortunately we cannot show you photos of their smiling faces as they will not let us take photos of them.

Solar Installations Investigations and a possible new cooperative

Slowly, slowly, we are working towards being able to give some support to the wells which have solar panels from an EU funded project 10 years ago, but where the pumps no longer work. In the March newsletter there was a report about a volunteer who had come to test the panels and we spent some time finding out more about these installations. There are around 30 of these wells, mostly for drinking water, and some Bedouin have managed to purchase a new solar pump though

they are pricey. We are hoping that the new cooperative, once it has become a legal entity, will be able to apply to one of the Egyptian ministries for small grants to help with purchase of solar pumps. There is quite a strong government drive for all things solar powered in Egypt - not surprisingly. Also a co-op could buy a number of solar pumps for a discount price, make a loan to Bedouin who need it to purchase it, and the money could be paid back from the saving on fuel costs for a petrol generator. This is all going to take time, then nothing seems to move very quickly here but it all gets there in the end.

Journeys and Gatherings



The Next Dam Journey - Provisional dates are for Spring 2020 in April and before Easter. If you are interested in helping with building a dam in the mountains, please let us know and your name will be forwarded to the journey leader. More information will be available in the next newsletter.

Our Winter Gathering will take place on Sunday 20 January 2020, at the Bear of Rodborough near Stroud and in the same format as the last 6 years. More information will be in the next newsletter after the November trip to Sinai.

And Finally



Sometimes one just needs to take a break and maybe there is a mountain to be climbed. John had been to Sinai on at least 4 occasions but not yet climbed Mt Sinai, or Gebel Mousa as it is known to the Bedouin. We walked up the back route and climbed to the very top - including the 743 steps to the summit. We spent a leisurely 2 hours at the summit, having lunch and listening to the silence. It wasn't until we went back down via the camel route to the monastery that we saw any other visitors. It was a great privilege to have the mountain to ourselves for that 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.

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