

Sinai Journey Report September 2020

Makhad
People Spirit Environment



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

The News

Two major events have worked in opposition to radically change the life of the Bedouin in the last year, - the pandemic and the weather. The effect of the pandemic has been disastrous financially, because many people had relied on the rather meagre income that the few tourists (mainly Egyptian with a few Israelis) have provided over recent years. Due to the pandemic South Sinai has been isolated like all the other Egyptian governorates by restricting movement around Egypt and borders had been closed.

However, the weather, in the form of heavy rain, has turned a crisis into an opportunity for many. Several falls of heavy rain, plus more light rain and two snow falls in the winter has brought more water to Sinai than has been seen in 15 years or more. Some areas did not have rain but the passing floods from the mountains have increased water levels in areas like Tarfa and wadi Gharba. The last heavy rain fell on a small area around Mt St Katherines but was heavy enough to cause flooding in St Katherines.

For those of you who have been to Sinai, the photo above shows a garden just over the top of Abu Giffa pass and the small lake is covering the pathway to the mountain gardens. We had to detour through the garden to get past with dry feet! The rains and high water levels have enabled many families to live in their gardens in the mountains since March and for the whole of the long summer months. It seems that everyone is growing lots of vegetables and the trees all look very healthy. The area has never looked so green! The mountainsides are covered in herbs and the beekeepers have made lots of honey this year. While life is tough financially, generally the mood was positive as Bedouin took back some control of their lives by living the old ways growing food and tending their goats, depending on the land to support them, not on tourism. Some Bedouin families have



St Katherine's is getting greener every year!

left the town and gone out into the desert with their tents, goats and camels, joining other families from the coastal towns. We found St Katherine's was almost eerily quiet with very few cars and Mahmoud remarked that there were now more security police and army in St Katherine's than there are Bedouin. There is certainly a very heavy presence here.

Not everyone has managed so well. We were told of many Bedouin without gardens, who have used all their small savings for food, and then run out. There has been some government aid but unfortunately it does not tend to reach the people in need. Faraj has been trying to arrange help for those most in need. There are a large number of families gathering wild herbs to sell, which is a sign of desperation, and not very good for the continued existence of the herbs.

Due to the pandemic, travel to Sinai has become very difficult and this is the first trip of the year, and not the third as it would usually be.

Well Stories

Around 10 years ago, a beautiful film was made about the disappearing traditional life of Bedouin in the Sinai in their mountain gardens. The documentary chronicled the lives of the last surviving mountain dwellers and the traditions they have been following for centuries. It featured Amria, an elderly lady who lives in the mountains full time, except in the two coldest months. The melancholy conclusion to the film was that when Amria passes away, Bedouin mountain heritage and a way of life would be lost. Well, Amria is still tending her gardens and her goats in the mountains, and seems as fit as a fiddle, but also, the tide has turned. Around 7 years ago there were only around 3 families who spent most of the year in the high valleys but since the advent of the well restoration programme, that number has been rising again. On a 2-day trip to the mountains, Mahmoud and I met one of the members of a family reclaiming their traditional lifestyle.

Shrarha lives with his family in Wadi Tinya and for the last few years, has been here most of the year, like Amria. We restored his son's well in November 2018 and the water from here flows down directly to the houses, saving the women from carrying water up from their garden wells. The well and its water, has been responsible for more families living in this remote mountain wadi. Shraha often visits other families living in the other mountain valleys and we counted them up. There are now **60 families** living this traditional way through most of the year from March to November. All of these families have been helped by the Makhad Trust through well restorations. They are making a good living from the trees in their gardens, growing olives, almonds, apricots, apples, pears, pomegranates, grapes, figs, and quince. This year they were all growing vegetables too, and many had made small extra plots by their houses to water more frequently. We saw new houses that had been built in several valleys and the communities are growing.



The Makhad Trust particularly wants to support people wanting to live like their ancestors, as preserving Bedouin heritage is one of the Trust's main aims.

One very new family taking on this challenge is Kamal. He has been restoring the family garden which also belonged to his brothers and sisters. Before, he had been a camel man working with



tourists at the monastery when they were busy and had earned enough money to buy a car. When the pandemic came, he reevaluated his life and decided to sell his car to raise funds necessary to buy out his siblings who were not interested in the garden, to mend the garden walls and build a new house for his young family, and he planned to restore the well too. However once he started digging he found very tough granite and knew he would need professional help, but he had spent all the money he had to establish his family, so we made a site visit to put him on our waiting list. His young children seemed very at home here. Kamal has

plans to plant hundreds of olives trees in the area around the house, and will grow vegetables in the old garden.

Another family living in the mountain wadis is Hussein's family. He and his young wife came to live in Wadi El Matther beside Mt St Katherine's, around 4 years ago, joining Sbael who has lived here all his life, and they have since expanded their family with two small children. Hussein was on our last beekeeping course and has expanded the number of his hives. They also keep goats which provide milk and cheese, and they have chickens for eggs. With growing vegetables in their gardens they have almost everything they need and only visit the town to buy rice, flour, lentils, sugar, tea and fuel for the generator. More families are coming to join this community of 10 families.



A very small but successful supportive project is the Seed Bank. Garden owners asked if quality seeds could be brought from the UK as the only seeds they could get were poor quality and did not grow true in subsequent sowings. In order to distribute the seeds and to produce a reliable supply, I have been bringing seeds for Mahmoud Hassan who has a large garden in the centre of St Katherine's for 3 years. Mahmoud sells some of the seeds but grows a lot of them to produce more seeds to sell on for a small donation, so he has a small business and it is self-generating. His seeds have been very much in demand this year as so many people realised that they

needed to grow vegetables as they had the water and not much money to buy shop vegetables.

Well Statistics

As at 30 September 2020

	22	Completed	Underway	Waiting Sponsor	Waiting List
Garden Wells		240	7	27	27 + 235 =262
Community Wells		243	11	42	42 +163 = 205
Totals		483	18	69	467

Previous total of completed wells at 30 November 2019 = 476

Beekeeping

It seems all the beekeepers have done very well this year because there has been so much nectar for the bees. They have all produced a good harvest of honey and many of the beekeepers have increased the number of hives they have and split swarms to fill them. Honey is selling at a very good price this year too. At 600le a kilo and with harvests of 60kg and more this is a considerable income for a family. We tasted some of Hussein's honey from his mountain garden and it was absolutely delicious.



Carpentry School

The graduates of the first carpentry school course have flown the nest and taken up work in the town. They are now proficient with hand tools and able to earn a living. Two of the students Eid Mohamed and Mohamed Hamid have been employed by a government housing engineer which is wonderful. We expect them to increase their skills while working with the engineer. They are working on building houses in Wadi Esbaia and on refurbishing a clinic there.

The first week of October sees the second intake of students starting their classes. We met them at the Carpentry school. Ahmed the teacher is on the left of the photo, with his two small daughters. As you can see the students are a very mixed class of ages, the youngest is Nadr who is 12 years old and the oldest, Salah is 35. Both he and 28-year old Sallah requested to join the project because the pandemic had shown them that making a living from tourism is a precarious matter. They wanted to learn a skill that would give them a reliable income for their families. Once a skill has been learnt, it can never be taken away. Both had been camel men, working with



tourists at the monastery. Even the younger boys have felt the push from the current situation and want to have a job to support themselves. A school education will not prepare them for work. It will be interesting to see how the class develops as time goes on with such a range of ages and life experiences.

Orphans Growing Herbs

The second intake of students for this project is from the St Katherines' area. They have planted up their gardens and made their first harvest, growing a form of sage and 3 types of oregano. One of the new gardens is beside the main road in the town, just below the football pitches. They have planted around 60 herbs which are growing well now. The ground here was so rocky and tough that Slim had to employ adult workers to move the rocks and dig the holes to plant the herbs. We hope in future that this will be a lush garden of herbs providing an income for these children and



their families for the future. We met Yussef, Sandos, Farrah, Hussein, Amna, and Ommee. All of the children have been bereaved by the death of their father. The other children on the course were not able to come to our meeting.

The area around St Katherine's has a unique climate which means that there are wild herbs growing here that are endemic, growing nowhere else. It is one of the things that makes this area a National Park and significant from an ecology point of view. The herbs that grow here are highly prized and can fetch a good price in the cities where

people use them for medicinal and culinary purposes. When times are difficult, many Bedouin collect the herbs but there are good ways and bad ways of doing so. Herbs should be collected after they have seeded so that the seeds stay in the ground ready for the coming years. And plants should be cut with the root left in the ground so the plant can continue to grow. Desperate people without financial means may not know how best to preserve this botanical heritage and collect the herbs before seeds are set and pull out the whole plant. Slim is trying hard to educate people on the best way to preserve these endemic species with their unique herbal properties and, by educating the children, he hopes that they will, in turn, educate their parents and wider families. The herbs the children grow are a mix of common herbs and endemic ones, so that they will be preserved.



Dams



Nearly all of the dams have had good water in them for a considerable part of the year. We saw Oda's dam, Rabat Nada dam, Amria's three dams, and the architects dam. All 22 of the dams built by the Makhad Trust were full of water several weeks after the rains, according to Mahmoud who had been to investigate. By contrast, the numerous dams built by the government in lower wadis are all empty. Mahmoud says the water only stayed for a day or so in these dams. There is also a huge new government dam beside the main road 5km from the town. Huge banks were constructed to catch the water but not a drop of the floods filled it as the water flowed downhill along the road which was lower than the dam! The Government engineer in charge of the dam programme who lives in St Katherine's was consulting with Mahmoud to find out why the Makhad Trust dams were so much more successful. At least part of the problem seems to be that government workers cut corners and did not excavate deep enough through the loose rock and silt to the bedrock so water has just seeped underneath the dams. The Bedouin have always been careful to 'dig down to the gebel' - the mountain to get a good seal. And, they did not consult with the Bedouin who know where the water flows and where the best places are.

The Future

While in Sinai, our work continued as usual but in the background there has been uncertainty, as there is with everything in life at the moment. In a normal year, travel for the next trip would have been booked immediately, but this year it is a case of wait and see what happens. It would be wonderful to be continuing the work in November, visiting the new wells that we started during this trip, but who knows when that will be possible. A dam build journey which was scheduled for October this year has been postponed until Spring next year, when it is hoped that some semblance of normality has been restored. Travel to Sinai is possible, but whether people will be confident to do so is another matter. As long as there are flights to Egypt, the projects will continue to run. Of one thing we can be sure, there is always a very warm welcome awaiting representatives of the Makhad Trust by the Bedouin of the Sinai Mountains.

There will be another newsletter during the winter and there will be news of the Spring Journey if it can go ahead.

None of this work would be possible without our amazing team consisting of Faraj, Mahmoud, and Helen on the Sinai end, and Sheila at the UK end with our trustees, plus support from the accounts team who look after the finances for us and for our sister charities.



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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