

Sinai Journey Report March 2022

Makhad
People Spirit Environment



Fatma's sons and grandsons show us her completed drinking well



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Project Manager*

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

A Reflection on the work of the Trust over the last 2 years

Since it is just over 2 years since the start of the pandemic and lockdowns began, it seems a good time to review how the Makhad Trust and our beneficiaries have been affected.

Whilst there is no population data that we are aware of concerning the impact of Covid-19 on the Bedouin population, anecdotal evidence and news from the Bedouin grapevine suggests that many Bedouin have caught Covid-19 and some have died with it. Mahmoud, our Sinai Manager, thinks that the pandemic has been most devastating to the Bedouin in the coastal communities and in the cities, particularly for those with pre-existing diseases. It seems that the earlier, and stronger, strains of the virus did not have quite the impact that other countries experienced, but there were still deaths and illness for many. Mahmoud thinks that the Bedouin in the mountains have been less affected because they live at altitude and have stronger lungs. Certainly, those Bedouin who work as guides and the women who take the goats grazing every day have very active lives and climb the mountains all the time. We hope the worst is over now.

The pandemic has brought its own challenges to running the projects. The first project management trip of 2020 was cancelled with two days' notice as the world began to shut down. With partial reopening, a trip was made in September 2020. Donations to the projects, particularly to the wells projects, dropped by nearly half, though there was a welcome resumption to the flow of funds in 2021. Our usual target is to start and complete around 45 wells in a year with four 'feeder' trips by the project manager. Since the pandemic started, there have been four trips in total but we have been able to start 66 new wells and 64 have been completed. We are very grateful to all our funders for continuing to support our work and for relaxing expectations around report dates on funding. The Trust has also managed to keep the other projects rolling too, including the Carpentry School and the Orphan Herb Growing Course.

Current Local News



The remodelling of St Katherine's is in full flow with new buildings springing up all over the town. As well as the new visitor centre, there is the new mountain hotel nearby, a hotel of single storey apartments, new shops, new police, fire and ambulance stations, new roads and new electric cables, sewers and water pipes. Outside the town huge numbers of apartments are being built. The whole town is under construction from 6am to 11pm. Two large cement works have been constructed, one just above the town, on the way to Abu Sila, and another on the road into town, to supply the building works. New roads are being built to connect the town to El Tur in the West and to Dahab in the East. So far, a track has been bulldozed along a beautiful wadi called Naqb El Howa then over pristine desert for about 60km. In the town, a road has been rerouted through the local cemetery which was bulldozed and the bodies and bones left exposed.

So far, there has been no consultation with the local inhabitants, though some have seen the plans which were released on the internet. They know when their house or garden is going to be affected when surveyors come and draw white lines through their property, though they are not told what these are for. A road may be coming through or an electric cable. Some houses have been demolished, and the inhabitants have been given 3 to 5 days to vacate. The white lines are something to fear as the harbingers of destruction.



As can be imagined, the Bedouin living in St Katherine's are not happy and there is an understandable air of dejection, even despair. Besides the threat of losing their homes and gardens, there is the constant noise, dust, power cuts, and huge influx of workers causing local food shortages. Only a few Bedouin are employed as night watchmen so there is no benefit to them at all so far. Bedouin living in the town who have gardens in the mountains at least have a safe place to retreat to for the summer. It has been a relief for our team to visit the outlying communities where there is no construction, just the usual peace and quiet and largely undisturbed desert.

In recent weeks there has been a Jewish feast and many Israelis have been coming to the town to trek in the mountains as they have done over the last 20 years. Mostly they have been unhappy or appalled by the destruction, and some have even left without staying.

St Katherine's has not been the only town to be selected for a make-over. On the drive through Cairo towards Suez, the elevated road showed similar signs of improvements. Along a roughly 12km stretch, any of the tall apartment buildings that are close to the road have had a vertical slice taken off them, so the outside walls now show the inner doors, and painted and tiled walls of what was the inside of people's homes. And there are thousands of them. The assumption is that the road is going to be widened. This is just one other of a huge number of construction projects throughout Egypt.

Just to add to the problems, inflation is again hitting the Bedouin hard, with food, fuel and essentials all costing more. This is, in some degree, part of a worldwide phenomenon affecting every country and due to international pressures, but it adds an extra burden to people who were already living on or below the breadline. Egypt has also been re-positioning itself on the financial markets and this has meant a devaluation of the Egyptian pound, with a further increase in inflation.

This winter has been very long and very cold, with temperatures much colder than usual, with an extremely bitter wind. I experienced temperatures of minus 5 or less due to wind chill and it is difficult to stay warm, even more so if one can't afford the electricity bill for heaters. Power cuts were affecting the townspeople several days a week, so access to electricity for heating has been difficult. Fortunately, most of the electricity cable has now been replaced and supplies are a little more reliable.

On a positive note, we found that there are a great many Bedouin living in their tents in the desert plain to the west of the mountains. We think that there must have been over 60 families spread across a wide area, all with their herds of goats and camels, grazing on the many herbs and bushes that are growing due to winter rain. Many of them are collecting water from wells that the trust has restored and without which they would not be able to continue this traditional way of life.

Well Stories

While we were visiting wells in the community at Wadi Gharba, Faraj talked about ownership of the gardens. Many of them have been handed down over many generations, and St Katherine's Monastery has 'papers' for all the old gardens, showing ownership, many of which date back to the 6th Century! .

Oda's Garden Well in Wadi Slav

When we went to visit the garden well of Oda in Wadi Slav (about one and a half hours drive from St K), we were greeted by some of his children, and the devastating news that Oda had died just 2 weeks ago, just after the well work had been completed. Oda's wife came out to see us and was able to give us the story of the well. She is Oda's second wife and has six young children to look after and the death of her husband was clearly very difficult for her. Wells are big and very deep in this wadi. Oda's well already had water but not enough for his extensive garden and for people wanting to collect drinking water. The funds donated had been used to deepen the well and now there was plenty of water. Oda's wife is still coming to terms with her new status as a widow and hopes to be supported by her brother in future. Oda was not a young man, but he had not expected to leave his family while they were so young.



Fatma's Community Well in Abu Sila

Fatma and her family live to the side of the village at the bottom end. Her husband dug the well many years ago and it had good water but the levels have dropped. There was only enough for 4 families to drink from it. Fatma's sons tried to dig out the well themselves but reached tough granite and needed expert help. The funds we gave to Fatma enabled the family to employ well diggers and

equipment to dig out the well, widen it and deepen it by nearly 2m. It now has enough water for 13 families with enough water for washing too. Fatma's house is not accessible for the government water trucks which bring washing water so her life is now very much easier. Like many Bedouin women on this trip, they were really pleased to have their wells finished in time for Ramadan when they will be doing lots of cooking. A photo of the completed well is on the front page of this report.

The Children's Well in Wadi Gharba

About 3 years ago, we went to see some wells in Wadi Gharba that were being restored. The area had not had rain in 5 years or more and was very dry. Drinking water was in short supply even though we had restored quite a few wells as there are many people living here. Some children had been watching the progress of one well restoration and decided that they wanted to find more water so that their mothers could do all their household work more easily. They asked a Bedouin water diviner where would be a good place to dig and then they started digging. The first time we saw their well it was 4m deep though they needed to dig a lot more to reach the water. Our policy is not to put a new well on our list unless it has evidence of water at some time, but we said that when they got to the water, or at least to damp sand then we would make a site visit. In the meantime the children dug out the well after school and at weekends. Eventually, at 8m they got to damp sand and we made a site visit. Then we were able to link them with one of our sponsors to have funds for the well and this happened in November last year. A couple of weeks ago we visited and found that the well diggers had now made the well 17m deep! There is 1m water too. They just need to dig 3m deeper and build flood protection round the top, connect the hoses and all will be done.



The children, aged from about 7 to 14, have done an amazing job. They had supervision and guidance from their fathers but all the initial work was carried out by Selema, Salah, Mustafa, Asmea, Yousef, Hamed, and Jemeya. They had done a huge amount of the work. They couldn't finish it themselves, as digging at such a depth needs expertise, but they were so pleased with what they have managed to do.

Hadja's Well beside Mount Sinai

About 5 years ago, I met a woman called Hadja and wrote about her in the newsletter at the time. She was walking with her donkey along a path to the village for supplies, but she had just come down from Mount Sinai. Every day Hadja gets up about 4 am, makes and bakes bread, then takes the bread and some water up the mountain to the coffee shops near the top where she supplies and sells it. Then she walks back down the mountain, makes some more bread and takes it back up the mountain again. She walked up about 800m



of ascent every day! And as you can see from the photos, she is in her 70's. On this trip



we visited her in her garden to make a site visit of her well which only has a little water. We were able to start her well straight away too, due to a change in circumstances of the scheduled well restoration. Hadja fell a few weeks ago and hurt her knees so she is currently having a break from her mountain trips.

Hadja is an inspiration to many people who walk up Mount Sinai.

Well Statistics

25	Completed	Underway	Waiting Sponsor	Waiting List
Garden Wells	265	5	22	62 + 172 = 234
Community Wells	275	14	29	73 + 141 = 214
Totals	540	19	51	448

Laundry

Unfortunately, this exciting new project has had to be put on hold until the reconstruction work in the town is mostly completed. Eid, whose garden is the site of the proposed laundry, woke one day to find a white line going right through his garden. He doesn't know if half the garden is going to be dug up for a road, or if a cable is going to be laid through it. With such uncertainty, it is best to wait and to keep hoping that construction plans will change and his garden will remain intact. An announcement by the President suggests that the reconstruction work will be finished in the summer, though few people believe this is possible.

Carpentry School

Ahmed Oda, the Carpentry School teacher has had difficulty recruiting students for the third course of basic skills. A combination of work as night watchmen, the cold weather, and the uncertainty of the future, has made possible candidates reluctant to come forward. He is expecting to find more interested students after Ramadan, which finishes in early May.

Herbs

The course teaching children how to grow herbs has continued after a pause for the winter while it was so cold. Over the winter the children planted out many seeds so that by spring they would have enough plants to transplant into their gardens later. It is only just getting warm enough to plant out seedlings now, and to take the plants out of their protective greenhouse. Mahmoud visits every month, to see progress. Their teacher, Slim, continues to teach medical students in Alexandria about the herbs indigenous to South Sinai, and especially their medical properties. This keeps him very busy.



Solar Installations Investigations

Another of our trustees, Dick, looks after this project. Our aim is to supply the high mountain gardens with a solar powered pumps for their wells to eliminate the need for petrol and diesel for generators. The fuel is expensive to buy and expensive to transport on camels, and in some cases, fuel costs equal the value of the crops produced. The problem has been to find a solar panel and pump that are compatible with wide wells of shallow or intermediate depth. Equipment for boreholes is relatively easy to acquire, but not this type. Dick has sourced equipment, but the challenge now is to transport it from Cairo, through Suez to St Katherine's, which must be done by a supplier company. It's a slow process but we will find a way through.

Beekeeping

We paused the beekeeping training programme 2 years ago while we looked for advice about the interactions with wild bees and honey bees. We would now like to get this programme working again, as it is such a lucrative way for garden owners to augment their income, especially while

there are so few opportunities for earning money. We are waiting for funds now, and hope to restart the project next winter.

Winter Social

After missing out on a social gathering last winter, it was good to meet up again in person, and the 2022 Winter Gathering proved very successful. We had some extra supporters join us for lunch at The Amberley Inn, just a couple of miles from our usual venue in the Stroud area. The food was delicious, the venue was a very nice old Cotswold Inn and the walk afterwards on Amberley Common helped blow away the cobwebs. It was good to bring together people who support our cause, and have an opportunity to talk about our work.



New Territories

We went for an exploratory visit to an area to the North of St Katherine's, where there is wide open, rolling desert leading to a high ridge called Jabal Al Ajmah and Jabal Al Til. There are Bedouin living very traditional lives as goat herders and camel breeders here. A new observatory is going to be built on the mountain ridge, where is it far from artificial lights. Faraj was asked to show men from the observatory how to access the area by jeep and part of the track is being paved for access by the construction company.



Future Trips



The next visit to Sinai will take place in mid June, when we hope to start another 10 new wells and to see more of the projects.

A Working Journey to Sinai is scheduled for early October, led by two of our trustees. The aim of the journey is to build another dam in the high mountains. If you are interested in participating, please get in contact with us using the details below.

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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