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Egypt Uses Water Resources to Make Deserts Bloom

By Leslie Bactor

Cairo

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Roughly 96 percent of Egypt's land mass is made up of desert. Since the time of the pharaohs, the country has relied on a fertile narrow strip along the Nile River to support every aspect of social and economic life. Now, once again, Egypt is looking to the desert as well as the Nile to build new communities and grow more food. Leslie Bactor has more on Egypt's ambitious plans to reclaim desert from our Middle East bureau in Cairo.



AP Photo

Young boy floats in the water in an aluminum pot on the Nile delta in Egypt, (2001 file photo)

Along the banks of the Nile, you'll still find ancient irrigation devices known as "shadufs" pulling up water from the river to irrigate the lush fields. The land is among the most productive in the world, and most of Egypt's population lives in the Nile valley that makes up only four percent of the country's total area. The rest is sand.

Egypt is facing a population boom in its already overcrowded Nile corridor. It has no choice but to move into desert lands and redirect people and agriculture. Over the past 50 years, the country has invested enormous resources to divert water from the Nile into desert areas.

Yet how can desert expansion be sustained when Egypt's very limited water supply is consumed virtually for free? Developers continue to set up five-star resorts in the Sinai that rely on water pumped in from the Nile. Anthropologist Donald Cole, from the American University of Cairo, has reservations about how water is being used and at what cost.

"There are other activities that are taking place in the desert lands - tourism, location of new industries, schools, new urban communities, golf courses - which have water uses," said Mr. Cole. "All of which is using Nile water, largely free. The water is not priced in ways that one would have to think of if you have to pay the true cost of the golf course. There is a kind of private sector development that is pushing into and taking advantage of what is available in water, acting as if the water is here forever, and plenty of it, no problem."

Whether the government will move toward a realistic pricing of water remains to be seen. In the meantime, it is pressing forward with reclamation plans. Over the next 10 years, it wants to reclaim 1.4 million hectares of desert. Critics, however, say this is unrealistic and estimate the figure to be half of that, water permitting. One highly visible example of desert reclamation exists on the desert highway connecting Cairo and Alexandria.

Mohamed Farag, 76, is a Bedouin from the Sinai Peninsula. He works at the Desert Development Center, a research initiative sponsored by the American University in Cairo. The center is one of the first experiments in land reclamation on the desert highway.

Farag points out over the land teeming with green and blooming bougainvillea and remembers what the area used to be. "Thirty years ago, when I first came here, this was

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all sand dunes," he said. "Now look at it. It's full of citrus trees, grapes, wheat, everything. This is all thanks to Dr. Bishai."

The Desert Development Center is the brainchild of Adly Bishai, Egypt's pioneer in sustainable desert living. While the center has spent the last 30 years researching how to make life in the desert sustainable, the reclaimed land surrounding it has been used for other purposes. Bishai laments that the land has been turned into gated communities and golf courses. If Egypt is going to make a dent in its population crisis and food shortages, he says, it must cater to the needs of average Egyptians.

"Egypt needs to use the desert to take care of the tremendous increase in population," he explained. "We also need to use the desert to produce food, which we are now importing most of it. We are in a mess! You see in order for the desert development to be successful, you have to have two things. One, enough water, and two, proper plans to get people convinced they can live there more comfortably and have a good life for themselves and their children."

President Hosni Mubarak inaugurated the world's largest water-pumping station last month in Egypt's Western Desert as part of a massive reclamation project. The station pumps more than 14 million cubic meters per day of water from Lake Nasser, behind the Aswan High Dam, to irrigate over 200,000 hectares of desert land. The ultimate plan is to resettle some six million Egyptians from the Nile Valley to southern Egypt and the western oases.

If Egypt is to have any success with such mega-projects, Bishai urges the government to learn from its past mistakes. He says many of the desert satellite cities outside Cairo evolved either into industrial zones with dreary housing or residential developments with luxury villas. Bishai says there has to be a compelling reason for people to leave their homes.

"Why would people want to leave their Cairo house and live somewhere else unless they get better housing? If they also have the facilities where they can send their children to good schools, where their wives can work - that's the only way to attract people to live there," he added.

As for Mohamed Farag, he was convinced long ago that desert living was far superior to city life. He has one piece of advice for city dwellers. "Come," he said, "come and live here. There is plenty of room. You can plant anything. This is a beautiful life, he says, one where you can live with dignity."

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