

The Beauty of Deserts – The Challenge of Desertification

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The theme for 17 June 2006 is "The Beauty of Deserts - The Challenge of Desertification". It is intended to serve a dual role: to highlight the serious threat posed by desertification while also celebrating the fragile beauty and uniqueness of the world's deserts.

There is an all-too-common misperception that desertification is about advancing deserts. Instead, it is a process of land degradation, resulting from both climate change and human-induced factors. Activities such as over-cultivation, over-grazing, deforestation and poor irrigation practices are turning once-fertile soils into barren patches of land. The consequences are devastating, with enormous social and economic costs.

Deserts, on the other hand, are magnificent ecosystems in their own right with incredibly diverse fauna. They stand as open-air museums to some of the world's most ancient civilizations and their rich cultures. Mythical names such as Babylon, Timbuctu or Nazca still have a captivating effect on our collective consciousness.

Even today, the remoteness and vastness of deserts such as the Sahara and the Kalahari instantly capture the imagination. The former, the world's largest, covers more than a third of the African continent and is approximately the same size as the United States.

The resilience of the peoples of the desert also fascinates - from the Uyghuri of the Takla Makan to the Kanembu of the Kalahari - who have mastered the inhospitable terrain to make the desert their home.

This special double celebration of World Day in the International Year of Deserts and Desertification therefore has two goals: To increase efforts to combat desertification as a global sustainable development challenge and to protect our deserts as unique natural habitat.

A global problem of transnational magnitude

Desertification, the phenomenon of encroaching desert lands, is hardly a novel occurrence in the history of mankind. It has played a salient role in hastening the decline of civilizations since ancient times. For example, both the Sumerian and Babylonian empires suffered telling blows when their agricultural productivity was destroyed, a gradual process principally attributable to improper drainage practices that allowed excessive salt concentrations to pollute their irrigated lands.

Archaeologists also have suggested that prolonged desiccation undercut the agricultural basis of the Harappan culture, a people who lived in the third millennium B.C. in what is now Pakistan. Finally, there seems little question that the Mediterranean littoral of Africa was far more fertile and cultivatable in the Carthaginian era (600-200 B.C.) than it is today.

Nonetheless, while man's experience with desertification may not be new, realization of it and its far-reaching ecological impact is. Worldwide recognition of desertification as a transnational environmental

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problem did not come about until 1968, when a severe drought struck the Sahel, a region in western Africa lying along the southern margin of the Sahara.

For six years, the countries of the Sahel - Mauritania, Senegal, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Chad - were devastated by uninterrupted drought and resultant famine. The natural and human consequences were tragically catastrophic: Lake Chad shrunk to only one-third of its normal size; the Niger and Senegal river systems failed to flood, thus leaving barren much of the most productive croplands in the region; shallow wells dried up, seriously restricting the grazing range of pastoralists; vegetation was denuded as starving animals stripped the land.

Reasonable rainfall did return to the Sahel in 1974, but not before drought, famine, and disease had killed an estimated 250,000 people and millions of domestic animals. As the tragedy and human suffering of people in the Sahel unfolded between 1968-1974, international attention became focused on their plight and the primary reason behind it: the inability of man to cope with spreading deserts in harsh climates.

The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) estimates that desertification currently affects approximately twenty-five to thirty percent of the world's land surface area. About 1,2 billion people in at least 100 states are at risk. Over \$42 billion in lost productivity or human support occurs each year on account of it. According to UNEP, the global rate of desertification is increasing, although the local rates vary by region.

Africa, with around sixty-six percent of its land either desert or drylands, is particularly affected by desertification. Already, a number of large-scale famines have occurred in the Sahelian region, resulting in migration of people towards more hospitable lands. Desertification occurs mainly through over-cropping, over-grazing, improper irrigation practices, and deforestation. These activities arise from poor land management, which, in turn, stems from the socioeconomic conditions in which the farmers live.

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