

Sinai Journey Report March 2021

Makhad
People Spirit Environment



Mahmoud and Faraj by a newly completed well in the community of Abu Ma'ada



*Helen Cranston
Project Manager*

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

The News

It seems that the pandemic has permeated into the lives of nearly everyone on this Earth, influencing everything we do in some way. Travel out of the UK has been discouraged since the start and risks of carrying the virus to a vulnerable community like the Bedouin were judged too high until recently. Last year, instead of the usual 4 trips to oversee projects, only one trip was possible. Hopefully this year we will be able to get back to the old routine though not without various difficulties to overcome. The added restrictions to travel make the trip expensive administratively, but this is a necessary hurdle to ensure the safety of all concerned.

The situation in Sinai has changed little since last September. The Bedouin are still relatively unaffected health-wise with only very few cases of coronavirus. However, the financial and economic consequences are being felt ever more keenly. Now, as with last year, those people with gardens and goats are able to scratch a living but there are other people who relied on tourists who now have no work at all. The monastery of St Catherine's remains closed, mostly to protect the ageing monks from contact with infected visitors. However this has been disastrous for some Bedouin who used to work in the monastery kitchens or doing other menial tasks and who have now been laid off.

In the last week, things have picked up with a number of Egyptian parties coming for walking experiences in the mountains, and it has recently been announced that the Taba border with Israel would reopen, though to a limited number of people each day. The Israelis have made the Sinai mountains a favourite holiday destination since the 1980s and like to do the more adventurous mountain treks that bring in good money for Bedouin guides. There is hope that this is the beginning of a reopening of the tourism business but also a realisation that it will be slow to restart. The Bedouin were more hopeful once this news came. The need for a cash injection into the local

economy has never been greater and it was very satisfying to be able to provide this via the projects.

One of the wonderful things about all the projects, all of which are Bedouin led and run, is how the money spent goes around and around the local community. The money paid to well owners, pays in turn for well diggers, for builders, for men to mix cement, for camels, donkeys, cars and men to transport cement and even for people to collect stones and sand. This money then gets spent in the local community, helping the shop owners supplying food, tools and cement. The well owner ends up with access to good supplies of water but the knock on effects are felt widely around the whole area, especially important at a time when people are so poor.

Well Stories



During this trip, we were able to start 26 new wells - a record for a new trip! In addition we evaluated work on 8 wells started last September, and made several new site visits to get people on our list of wells waiting for sponsors. We could not have done this without the generosity of our sponsors, many of whom have funded this project repeatedly over the years.

Well statistics are slowly approaching the milestone of 500 restored wells. Hopefully the next report will show we have passed this by a good margin, certainly some of the wells started in this latest round, told us they wanted to complete in one go.

We went to visit El Ramthy to see one well in progress, and to start three new ones, followed by a long

and bumpy ride to the other side of the Blue Mountains to see a completed well in a remote spot. The remoteness is what makes this well so important. In a month or so there will be many families moving into the area with their tents, their goats and their camels, to come for the grazing. The vast plains and bare rock mountains may seem devoid of life, whether plant or animal but closer observation will show a rich profusion of herbs and other small plants coming into flower. Goats grazed in this area will fetch a good price at market, and when there is no other way of making a living, life is hardly possible. The well we had just seen is one of many dotted around these rocky deserts that have been restored by the Trust. Without them, and the water they provide to Bedouin and their livestock, there might be no alternative to selling all their animals and using the proceeds for food until there is nothing left. The wells and their access to water offer a lifeline back to the old ways of self sufficiency and nomadic life.



At El Ramthy we found that there had been heavy rain last November which had caused a flood down the massive valleys, past the area where 20 plus wells are scattered over the confluence of two wadis. The flooding was exacerbated by a pulse of water when a government dam 5km up hill, burst and crumbled. The dam, about 4m high and 30m long stretched across a narrow side valley, but held a significant volume of water. The Bedouin have long been dismissive of the quality of build of hundreds of these dams built all over the mountains. They have been built too thin, with too little cement, and no strengthening of steel bars as stipulated in the plans. Someone has made a great deal of money with these dam contracts! Most of the dams hold water for just a few days, some only for a few hours as they leak, both through the walls and underneath the dam.

The poor quality and leakiness of the dams has not concerned the Bedouin unduly - it is what they expect of the corrupt system of contracts from the government, but for a dam to fail and cause worse flooding is a big concern, especially as some dams have been built above houses.

Fortunately this dam failure only caused damage to a couple of wells, filling them with sand, though some hoses were also ripped out of the ground and damaged, though even this damage is a huge setback to people with few financial resources. The hoses belonging to one man, Hussein Salah, were expensive quality hoses, bought during times when there was more work, and stretched for 2km from his well down to his garden. He cannot afford to replace them now when there is only just enough money from his garden to support his family with food.



The remains of the dam



In future, we hope to find a small amount of funds from one of our supporters to help with well repair costs to support Hussein and others in his position.



A few days later we visited Esbaia Up, a community about 10 miles out of St Katherine's, round the back of Mount Sinai. This project is a drinking well, now completed, and is a short distance and slightly elevated above the community in an abandoned garden. We have restored nine wells for this large and growing community already. We found that they had dug out the well by 4m and found good quantities of water, helped even more by winter rains which have raised the water table in this area. In fact they had sufficient water to use it to grow vegetables in the garden beside it and will continue to do so until mid summer when water levels are expected to drop and it will be needed for drinking water for the community. The well owner was away on the day we called but four boys from the village came to show us the work and give us the story of the restoration.

As at 31 March 2021

	22	Completed	Underway	Waiting Sponsor	Long Waiting List
Garden Wells		244	14	19	238
Community Wells		249	20	30	208
Totals		493	34	49	446

Carpentry School

Course number two draws to a successful conclusion after six months with its six students graduating from their basic skills course. There are only five in the photo as one of the students had to be elsewhere on this day. Mahmoud presented the students with their carpentry aprons, certificates and badges showing they had learnt at St Katherine's Carpentry School. They will continue with some 'on-the-job' training with Ahmed when he goes to do carpentry work.



Salah Gharib Mohamed, Abdulahmen Ramadan Selama, Nadr Salah Mousa, Mohamed Hassan Mousa, Sallah Ibrahim Oda, Sallah Mousa Hassan, were all very proud of their achievements.

They have been training by making a variety of things such as doors, windows, cupboards, tables and also they assisted with the construction of the drying racks - see below.

The students were of mixed ages, ranging from 13 to 34. Ordinarily, we would have preferred to support teenagers to learn a skill that would give them the means to support their families as they grow up. However, the pandemic has made life very difficult, as mentioned before and it did not seem appropriate to turn away adults who need a new career to support their families. The two older students, Salah and Sallah, did very well, and learnt quickly while some of the younger students will need some support for a bit longer. Ahmed plans to start a new course in the Autumn with 6 more students.

Drying Racks



This new project to provide women garden owners with drying racks for their orchard garden fruit has just completed its first stage. The project was requested by a young Egyptian woman called Zahra, who acts as an agent to collect and sell produce from the gardens and works with only the women garden owners. Zahra drew plans for the racks and then negotiated with Ahmed at the Carpentry School to have them made up by the students.

They are now ready to be taken to the gardens for when the fruit is ready, in a few months time. The racks will help both Zahra and the women by increasing the quantity of quality fruit available. Apricots are a very popular crop with a high demand here in Sinai, but they perish quickly and are prone to fly infestations. Drying the apricots makes them last longer and increases their value but they can become covered in dust or damaged when dried on the ground and this reduces the value of the crop. We will be watching this project with interest to see how it affects the value of the crops grown for the garden owners. If successful, we hope to find funding for more racks.

Orphan Herb Project

This project took a long pause over the winter while the herbs lie dormant, but now that spring is here, the students are looking forward to trips up the mountains with their teacher Selim to find the endogenous and rare herbs that are so special. These trips are their favourite part of the course. Most of the children had rarely been to the mountains until they started to learn about herbs, but now they enjoy their time learning about the landscape and regaining the traditional knowledge that their ancestors had. They will be looking for local varieties of oregano, sage, and rosemary which are in high demand as culinary herbs but they will also be learning about the medicinal herbs which grow everywhere and for which there is also a demand. Three of the students were not able to make it to our meeting so are not on the photograph which was taken in their herb garden.



Dams

Due to the pandemic, the next dam building trip with supporters from UK will have to wait until travel restrictions are lifted. However there is some news on dams in general.

We went to make a new site visit in the village of Abu Sila for a widow called Fatma Ibrahim Salem, and her family. She lives in an area where there are few wells and her well had been flooded a few years ago. There are quite a number of small government dams in this area, placed one after



another down a long wadi to the side. All the Bedouin have been critical of the build quality of all the government dams as they only hold water for a day or so and leak like sieves. However, the Bedouin are a resourceful people and could see the advantages of having extra water if the dams were more structurally sound, so they have been repairing some of them. Mostly this entails making a cement seal on the water side of the dam, though it is likely that they have plugged obvious holes with stones and extra cement. Near to Fatma's well they had thickened the dam so that it is wide enough to drive a vehicle over to reach the houses on the other side. The repair work has

been so successful that a series of dams has held water since rains last November, making a big difference to wells downhill from the dams. One garden owner whose garden well had been destroyed by floods had even planted up their garden with vegetables by running a hose from the nearby dam to provide water. While only a temporary solution, and one that shows the desperate need to grow food any way they can, it also shows resourcefulness and hope.

Beekeeping

Although we are not currently running a beekeeping training course, there was news that the graduates from the completed courses are all still successfully beekeeping. Mohamed from our second course, who has a garden right in the town has increased his number of hives from 10 to 16. There are some Bedouin who now keep bees who did not do the course but have learnt from others and now have some bees in their own gardens. Many gardens we passed have beehives in them. It should be a good year for the beekeepers because there are so many herbs growing everywhere due to rains last year plus the numbers of restored gardens keeps increasing giving bees more possibilities to find pollen. So lots of sweet honey and good income for the beekeepers will be the result this year.

New Project! A weaving project to support Bedouin women and maintain Bedouin traditions



This project was proposed by Faraj Fox and a Bedouin woman living in Abu Sila called Selma Ahmed Salem. Faraj told us that Selma is the last remaining weaver in St Katherine's. It is a traditional craft among Bedouin women but is dying out. In the past the women would collect goat and camel hair and spin it into wool to weave their traditional tents. It is possible that it started to die out when a prolonged drought made grazing goats untenable and so there was very little wool. Now there has been enough rain over the last 5 years for most families to keep goats and so there are huge numbers of them. Most are sold to provide an income to the family. All the Bedouin are

finding it difficult to support themselves financially as there is not enough work to go around. This project would bring in a small income to goat and to camel owners who collect the wool and then to women who can spin and weave. Many Bedouin women have spare time and would like to increase the income to their family, and they would like to learn to weave carpets and other items.

Selma's greatest wish is to teach other women to weave and to do this with a small informal school. She needs help to set the project up, for materials, running costs, and for income for herself. The plan is to teach 8 women in a class every 6 months so they can set themselves up in the small cooperative making woven handicrafts and supporting their families. Our next move is to look for funding for the project.

Spring in Sinai



Mahmoud, Faraj and some well owners are enjoy tea in a favourite shady place in Sheikh Awad. We have often had to wait to see a well owner and this little shelter in the garden of Hassan Hamden Salah is always available, providing shade from the hot sun or protection from a bitter wind. There is water, tea, herbs and rugs for any visitor to make themselves at home. And at the moment, it has the most stunning clematis growing over the top and down one side.



Due to the winter rains in Wadi Gharba and Sheikh Awad the plants were all blooming. The chamomile were particularly beautiful with their large yellow flowers, but there were tiny delicate flowers on other plants too - nearly all of them considered to be herbs as they have beneficial properties.

Conclusion

The Makhad Trust has been supporting this disadvantaged community for over 20 years and every year we think life cannot get more difficult or tougher for people, and yet every year some new challenge comes along. We hope and pray that life will become easier and that they will be rewarded with more autonomy and possibilities to live a more traditional life. It seems that the challenges they face are, in fact, pushing them into living more like their ancestors did, and more of the old ways are being remembered because the old ways were self sustaining. And each visit shows the resourcefulness of this people. Our work has given them the means to do that through restoration of garden wells or community wells and other projects. Most people have diversified as well as gone backwards in time and done so successfully but we still worry about all those who don't have gardens or goats and who are really struggling. We worry about those people who live further out of the area in which we work and do not have the support of an organisation like the Makhad Trust. It would be good if we had the resources to spread our support further and hope that this will happen in the future.

Supporters Social Meetings and Trips

We usually have an annual social event in January where our supporters can join members of the Trust for lunch and a walk in the Cotswolds. It has been postponed for the time being but we hope to hold the event in the Autumn or next January. When international travel is a possibility, we will post details of the next dam building project journey for interested supporters to join us in Sinai to meet the Bedouin and see our work.



Mahmoud and Faraj have a well earned drink with Hussein from Wadi

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.

The Makhad Trust,
Wolseley House, Oriel Road, Cheltenham, GL50 1TH
01242 544546

www.makhad.org

Contact info@makhad.org or helencranston@makhad.org

The Makhad Trust is a not for profit organisation managed by a Board of Trustees and is a registered charity No 1100377