Azraq Oasis Ramsar Site: how the local community improves and benefits from wetland conservation

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Jordan

The Azraq Oasis Ramsar Site in Jordan is unique for its geography, history and present management by the Royal Society for the Conservation of Nature (RSCN) for both conservation and for providing a source of livelihood for local people.

The Ramsar Site lies at the lowest point of the 36,000 km² Azraq Basin under which, is an aquifer that extends from Syria through Jordan to Saudi Arabia. Historically, the oasis has played an important role in providing freshwater for the Bedouins (pastoral nomads) of the region, as well as material (e.g. reeds) and food (e.g. fish and wild game). As a result, a 73km² area of the Oasis was designated as a Ramsar Site in 1977 and a smaller 12 km² area designated as the Azraq Wetland Reserve in 1978. The Site is managed by the Royal Society for the Conservation of Nature, the oldest environmental NGO in the Arab region.

In the mid-1980s, an increasing amount of water was pumped from the aquifer to provide water for agriculture and the urban areas so that the water level in the aquifer fell and was no longer able to flow out of the surface springs.

Due to this threat, the Ramsar Site was therefore placed on the Montreux Record in 1990. This raised international concern and resulted in a number of projects, including Ramsar Advisory Missions to the Site to find solutions to the problem. One action was that the Ministry of Water and Irrigation agreed to pump water from the aquifer at a rate around 1.3-1.5 million cubic meters per year. However, that rate has since been reduced.

Another solution recognized by RSCN to address the problem of over-abstraction of water, was to work with the local community to gain their support for the conservation of the Wetland Reserve and the Ramsar Site. They did this not only through awareness campaign and also, by developing livelihood projects (e.g. production of handicrafts for sale by RSCN) and employing only staff.
from the local community. This approach proved very successful and has now been adopted at all the 10 RSCN managed protected areas in Jordan, including the recently designated Fifa Nature Reserve Ramsar Site.

To further strengthen this approach of managing their protected areas for conservation and for improving the livelihood of the local community in order to gain their support for the sites, each RSCN protected area needs to produce an annual socio-economic beneficiary report that records the direct and indirect financial benefits to the local community.

In January 2017, the Government of Jordan extended the boundary of the Azraq Wetland Reserve from 12 km$^2$ to 73km$^2$ so that it now coincides with the boundary of the Azraq Oasis Ramsar Site. Probably as nature’s own way of celebrating this event and the hard work that has gone into conserving the site, Azraq received a heavy downpour of rain in a single day in mid-April 2017 that was enough to fill the 73km$^2$ Site with water, a fact that local people reported as not having seen since 1994, 23 years ago!

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