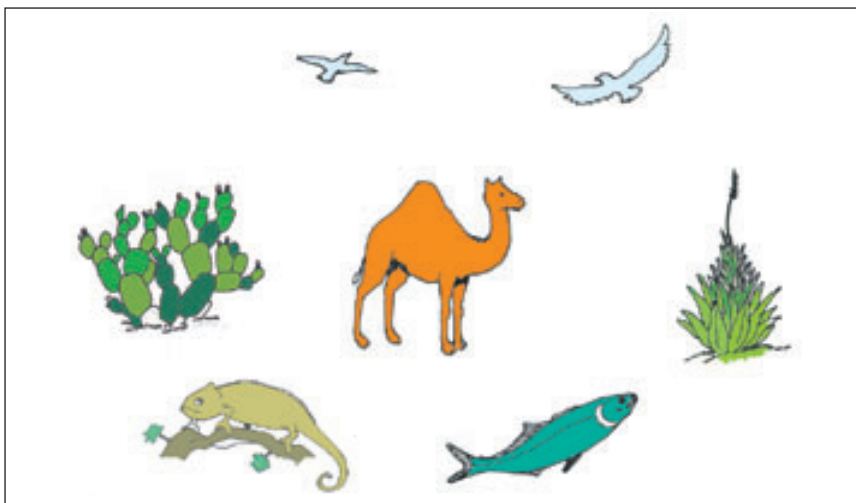




BIODIVERSITY IN THE ARAB WORLD



What is biodiversity?

In simple terms, biodiversity is the whole corpus of plant and animal species that the Creator of the Universe created and put at man's disposal.

What are the specific features of biodiversity in the Arab world?

The Arab world is one of the parts of the world with the richest and

most varied biodiversity. A place where three continents (Asia, Africa and Europe) meet, it is also poised between the Mediterranean Sea, the Red Sea, the Gulf of Oman and the Indian and Atlantic Oceans. Very diverse plant and animal species live side by side here, from the most common to the most specific, and the oldest.

And the coasts of the Arab world are bordered by the most varied regions: sebkhas, beaches, marshes, sandy stretches, coral reefs and mangrove swamps.

The plant species in the Arab world are also very numerous and varied. From the desert or semi-desert wastes, where every form of life is pretty well non-existent, to the leaf-shedding or coniferous forests, as well as plains and steppes, various types of plant life coexist in the Arab world: short-lived bushes, desert shrubs, mangrove swamps in wetlands, etc.

The Arab world is also overflowed by millions of migratory birds, of over 200 different species, which live in the Fertile Crescent and in the east, central and west Mediterranean.

Plant cover in the Arab world has still retained some of its original special features, despite the profound changes which have affected it through the ages, in the Arabian peninsula, or in North Africa, there is still a desert-type vegetation; in Syria and Lebanon - and in North Africa - types of plant that are specific to wetlands and Mediterranean mountain areas can still be found today.

Further, several types of plant (flora) which have long grown in the Arabian deserts have become varieties that are specific to these regions and do not grow anywhere else. These are unique species.

The Greater Sahara includes two regions which are very rich in unique species: Egypt and Libya, and Algeria and Morocco, separated by the Sirte desert. Most of the plant species of this region of the Arab world have arrived there via the stretches of land that link this area to the rest of the world.

The same holds good for biodiversity as regards animal species (fauna). The Asiatic bear lived there until very recently, in Syria. And the animals of Western Europe, such as stags and deer, live in the Atlas Mountains; certain animal species specific to Ethiopia are found in the south-east of Egypt, in the heights of Yemen, and in the south of the Hijaz. In the north of the Hijaz crocodiles can be met with; spotted panthers can be seen in the north of

Egypt, in Libya, in Algeria and in Morocco, living isolated from the rest of the pack and facing extinction.

Biodiversity in the Arabian deserts

Biodiversity in the desert regions of Arabia is particularly important in that these areas contain extremely rare species which have medicinal, economic and pastoral value, 80-90% of the plant species in the Arabian deserts have medicinal value that the bedouin know all about. Indeed, there are plants with fibres (woody), plants which contain oils, and plants for burning. Even the desert animals have become sources from which medicines are made.

The main phenomena which endanger biodiversity are the transforming of oases, beds of oueds, and valleys into farming land or building land, over grazing and deforestation.

Biodiversity in the Arab heritage

The heritage of the Arab world is packed with teachings about the concept of biodiversity. Poetry is a witness to this, as are encyclopaedias and tomes on such varied fields as medicine, pharmacology, geography, agriculture, philosophy and thought.

The Arab poets subdivided the plant kingdom into trees and plants, flowers and fruit, seeds and thorns, and the animal world into quadrupeds, birds, reptiles and insects. They also differentiated between various types of country, between plain and mountain, rock, hill, meadow, desert, oued, etc.

In the field of pharmacology, the Arabs made lists of names of a large number of plants, setting out in detail their specific qualities, where they grew, and their therapeutic value.

What are the international conventions on protecting biodiversity?

Faced with the serious dangers threatening biodiversity, caused by the stepping up of agricultural, industrial and town-building activi-

ties, several international treaties and conventions were signed to make sure all aspects of biodiversity were protected, via protection of the flora and fauna and organizing of fishing and trading in species threatened with extinction, and via protecting wild life and natural refuges.

The international convention on biological diversity, signed in 1992, was certainly the most important convention on the issue, in that it is both comprehensive and detailed, and offers those states which have biologically diversified ecosystems the legal framework needed for their protection.

What part can you play in protecting biodiversity?

- Gather information on your country's fauna, flora and micro-organisms, and on the places where they live and the conditions which are likely to guarantee their survival;

- Exchange information on biodiversity in your country, particularly on endangered species or those which are exposed to dangerous factors, and take part in decision-making on means of preserving them;

- Take part in conferences, colloquiums and seminars on the conditions of protection and conservation of biodiversity;

- Join in carrying out mini-projects to make people hear about biodiversity, and to make sure it is preserved.

Sources: *Environmental Facts (5 - sustainable agriculture), a study prepared by a group of NGOs.*

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