



## The grass is greener: rehabilitating the Syrian Badia

The Syrian steppe or 'Badia' covers 10 million hectares of central and eastern Syria. Characterized by poor soils and low rainfall, it is suitable only for grazing by small ruminants, equines and camels. The Bedouin communities herd about 12 million animals here. After years of severe drought and intensive grazing, the Badia has become badly degraded.

With support from the International Fund for Agricultural Development, the local communities have restored vegetation in about one third of the Badia rangelands – nearly 3 million hectares. The key to success was involving local people in decision-making and encouraging them to take full ownership of the rehabilitation and management of the rangelands.

Using their extensive local knowledge, the Bedouin herders worked with experts in the drafting and implementation of the management plans. They determined how many animals should graze in a given area at a given time, taking seasonal conditions into account. Various approaches were used, including films, meetings with communities, field days and workshops, to bring communities on board and communicate the new rangeland management techniques. Once communities had agreed to collaborate, they and the experts collectively established the boundaries and selected the sites suitable for rehabilitation.

Three key approaches were pursued in the rehabilitation: resting, reseeding and planting. Where possible, the land was simply rested for up to two years. As a result, native plants that had long disappeared have sprouted and flourished and the full range of vegetative cover has re-emerged.

Where degradation was advanced, the focus was reseeding using native rangeland forage plants or plants suited to the local conditions. Soils were first furrowed to enhance rainwater infiltration. As a result, the seed production units now generate 160 tons of seed per year.

More than 930,000 hectares of the Badia have been regenerated by resting, 225,000 hectares reseeded and about 94,000 hectares have had nursery shrubs planted. Each plant is encircled by a small handmade soil bank to protect the plant and collect rain. In this way, shrubs are watered once when they are planted, and then rely



on this simple irrigation method thereafter. Regular browsing by livestock keeps the shrubs from becoming woody and prolongs shrub life. Eventually, they reseed themselves.

As a result, breeders have reported up to a tenfold increase in the average productivity of the land, from 50 to 500 feed units per hectare. This rehabilitation has not only provided fodder, but also led to a healthier ecosystem to which birds, insects and animals are returning.

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