

Daily Dawn

Earthly matters: The mysterious Rann of Kutch

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I had always heard talk of the Rann of Kutch in conservation circles as this mysterious, no man's land on the border with India, a salt marsh land teeming with un-disturbed wildlife (non military personnel are not allowed into this area).

Legend has it that this salty lowland is a resting site for migratory birds from Siberia, and a winter home for pink flamingos. What an amazing sight that would be, to see hundreds of pink flamingos... With these exotic thoughts in mind, I headed towards the border area to a forest near Badin in Sindh, located just on the edge of the Rann of Kutch.

In April 1965, a dispute which started here led to the Indo-Pak War of 1965, when fighting broke out between India and Pakistan. Booharki Forest, which I was to visit, was in fact planted in 1965 in order to shore up the defences of the border area. Seeds of the 'Devi' tree were sprayed from a plane. This is an invasive species of tree but it grows fast. There used to be Keekar and other local varieties of trees as well in the forest, but most of them have died now.

I could see why the forest was planted, when I reached the site. For miles, there is flat, barren land, unrelieved except for the forested area. During the cyclone that hit Badin in 1999, almost 80 per cent of the trees in the forest were felled. Then there were the floods in 2003. What forest remains looks very dried up and ready to catch fire!

"The water course that brought water to the forest had become dismantled due to neglect — the first thing we did was to restore the water course" explained members of the Badin Development and Research Organisation (BDRO) who have been working in the area since 2002. They have already received funding from the UNDP Small Grants Programme to control water pollution in Badin town. Now they have received funding from WWF's Indus for All Programme through their Partnership Fund to restore Booharki forest and develop the forest ecosystem for the benefit of the local communities.

The BDRO had already levelled three acres of empty land and made it ready for plantation, now that the water course has been rehabilitated. They used local labour to prepare the water course in exchange for dead trees (for fuel wood) and water. A tough bargain, but the NGO explained to me: "These are desert people; they are always travelling in search of water".

They added: "We are coordinating with the government's line department and establishing a nursery for the provision of plants for the forest". They have a difficult job ahead of them, for

they plan to plant trees on almost 100 acres of forest land and introduce a ban on the cutting of trees with the help of the government! I mean, this is the only forest in the area for miles, so how are they going to prevent the local communities from cutting the trees?

“We are organising the local communities into community organisations and including them in our project. We explain to them that when the trees go, the water table will go down as well and their (small scale) agriculture will be affected. Also, after April, the hot winds start blowing here and this forest protects the villagers from all the dust that is blown in from the Thar Desert. They can benefit from the forest by bee farming and grazing their livestock”. I certainly hope the community organisations become strong protective pressure groups in this area.

I took a tour of the forest — hard to believe that the foliage was once so thick, that the soldiers from the Pakistan Army had built trenches under the trees where they could hide. There was also plenty of honey in the forest then, and green grass where goats could graze. It was just hot, dusty and bare now – with only a few healthy trees remaining.

We visited a ‘Malha’ community living outside the forest, who had stopped fishing and settled here almost 30 years ago. “There were plenty of trees here once — then after the cyclone and the floods in 2003, most of the trees got damaged. Also, there is hardly any water these days. Yes, once the water comes for the forest we can use it as well for our livestock,” explained one of the villagers. They wait patiently for better times to come around — in the mean time, they have their buffaloes and sheep to feed and their wheat to grow with whatever scarce water they can extract from a tube-well.

The BDRO is working hard to get irrigation water for the forest. They have signed an agreement with the Forest Department, and will give their staff training. I guess the army is no longer interested in the forest — and the local people are more than happy with that — already they had to agitate against the Rangers to get their fishing rights back for a nearby lake. I think it’s best to let the local communities manage their own natural resources!