Stories from the Field 08

# Restoring Forests and Rangelands and Creating New Income Opportunities

## Participatory Forest and Rangeland Management Project in Iran

Iran is a major oil producing country with the third largest oil reserves in the world. Most of the country is situated on the Iranian Plateau covered in desert or pasture. The Karoon River, which flows through Southwest Iran and passes through five provinces, has the largest basin of any river in the country. In recent years, the trees and grasses covering the Karoon River Basin are disappearing due to illegal deforestation and over grazing. This has become a cause of natural disasters such as soil erosion, mudslides, and landslides.

Under these circumstances, Japan conducted the Study on Watershed Management Plan for Karoon River covering the upper basin from 2000 to 2002. This study examined the requirements for restoring and improving vegetation and for raising the living standard of local people. Based on the results of this study, the Government of Iran requested Japan to implement a technical cooperation project with the goal of introducing alternative livelihoods for local people and using natural resources in an appropriate manner, while managing and protecting forests and rangelands, in order to prevent destruction of the land caused by excessive deforestation and over grazing.

The result was the initiation of the "Participatory Forest and Rangeland Management Project in Chaharmahal-va-Bakhtiari Province" in 2010. This province occupies about 50% of the Karoon River Basin. First, Japan selected five villages as pilot sites together with the Natural Resources and Watershed Management General Office (NRWGO) of Chaharmahal-va-Bakhtiari Province and then experts from Japan and Iran worked together in an effort to balance forest and rangeland management as well as village development while building up trust with local residents.

Mr. Seiichi Mishima, a leader of the project, describes his initial impression right after the project launched as follows, "Iran's population is growing rapidly and to accommodate this rapid growth, the country required the sustainable development of industries such as pastoral agriculture, even after its agrarian reform. However, Iran has limited forest and rangeland areas that can be used for pastoral agriculture, and no matter the regulations put in place by the national government, the country's forest and rangelands continued to decline and degrade due to over grazing by a number of heads beyond control."

Mr. Mishima (pictured at right) checking the growth of wild garlic together with local people (Photo: Japan Overseas Forestry Consultants Association [JOFCA])

The project's specific activities began with restoration work involving the planting of seeds of Quercus trees, long used by local communities, and of edible wild plants, a local specialty item lost due to over harvesting, in order to restore vegetation in forests and rangelands. At the same time, check dams were constructed in places with heavy erosion in order to stop loss of soil and sediment.

Briefing on the highland rangeland management plan given at a nomadic village (Photo: Japan Overseas Forestry Consultants Association [JOFCA])

"Large acorns from Quercus trees were used in the past as food and more recently as feeding stuff. The process of restoring vegetation, by having the seeds fall to the ground where they bud, mature, and grow into trees or grasses such as pasture and edible wild plants, had one barrier: the presence of free range livestock. Once newly budded and maturing trees and grasses are eaten by livestock, future generations of this vegetation will not grow. To prevent this, we created a protected area by erecting fences or assigned lookouts to prevent livestock from eating the vegetation. At the end of the project, we established a way of protecting the land where livestock could be fed and vegetation restored. I believe the establishment of such a model that can balance both was a major achievement of this project," says Mr. Mishima.

At the same time, this project also carried out activities for the development of local villages. For example, as alternative means of livelihoods, small orchards for growing peaches, chestnuts, grapes, apricots, and other fruits were created, and beans and vegetables were also intercropped on a trial basis. In addition, dress-making training was also given to women in an effort to sell school uniforms. These women-centric activities eventually developed into self-funded microcredit projects. The number of participants increased and a financial service center was established where poor women could obtain small unsecured loans. These funds are used to finance new business ventures by women, including the purchase of sewing machines or nest boxes for raising honey bees.

"The most important points about working together with the village people were never to lie, and to say no to the requests that I could not fulfill. Paying particular attention to these two points, we requested funds so that activities to create new alternative means of livelihood could be sustained through local efforts even after the project ended. One of the greatest achievements of this project was how overjoyed the village people and NRWGO staff were to have the project implemented with Japan. A heart-felt gift of chestnuts I received from the village people at the end of the project was special," explains Mr. Mishima.

After the project ended in 2016, the Government of Iran praised the entire project for transferring participatory approaches to forest and rangeland management in a manner suited to the local community. A similar but expanded project is slated to begin in FY2017 in neighboring provinces located in the same watershed. It is expected that some of the staff who learned under Mr. Mishima's tutelage will be playing an active role as they have been assigned to manage and oversee this new project. (As of May 2017)