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The concept of Al Hima

Sustainable land use in the WANA region

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Al Hima is a traditional rangeland management system, which has been established in the Arabian peninsula region by tribal peoples. They depended on sustainable land use patterns that would assure long-term survival in the face of scarce resources, particularly water.
The term 'Al Hima' means protected area or protected place. HIMA is also used as an abbreviation for Human Integrated Management Approach, which emphasises the role of human activities within this nature conservation system. The participation and active involvement of local population in Himas represent the main difference to nature reserves, which usually do not allow people to live in and from the resources within the reserve.

The restriction of land use in Himas predates Islam, when access to an area was forbidden by powerful individual or group owners for private uses. With the rise of religious values and practices in Islam, the Prophet Mohammed transformed Himas into natural areas set aside permanently or seasonally for public good. The Hima concept became a community-based natural resources management and conservation system, which seeks to protect areas of land by encouraging local participation that integrates social and environmental priorities. Himas are one possible approach to ensure common welfare and ecosystem sustainability. Today, it is seen as one of the most widespread and longstanding indigenous/traditional conservation institutions in the region with a history of more than 1,400 years.

To be called a Hima, it should (a) be constituted by a legitimate governing authority, (b) be established in the way of God, for purposes pertaining to public welfare, (c) not cause undue hardship to the local people and not deprive them of resources that are indispensible to their subsistence, (d) realise greater actual benefits for society than detriments.

Decline and revitalisation

During the second half of the 20th century, the Hima concept lost its status as an integral part of livelihood

provision for livestock breeders and other rural populations. In Saudi Arabia alone, the number of Himas declined from around 3,000 in the 1950s to only a few dozen community-managed Himas around the year 2000.[1]

Different political and socio-economic changes led to the deterioration of the Hima concept and impoverished nomadic and other rural populations:

- Policies: State authorities favoured the promotion of crop cultivation, which strained soils and water resources.
- Industrialisation: Pollution and destruction of water, air and soils had a direct effect on ecosystem health. In drylands, where water is the most limiting resource, natural and human processes tend to bunch in areas where water is relatively abundant (e.g. rivers, wetlands, highlands). Pollution from industries is therefore directly affecting neighbouring ecosystems.
- Creation of nation states: The traditional movement of herds crossed today's political borders, which was important for the recovery of vegetation. Restricted movement led to over-grazing of accessible rangeland.
- Nationalisation of land: Tribal management of Himas was replaced by state control, which lacked local knowledge and structures of social control and accountability. This led to mismanagement and overexploitation. In Jordan, for example, the dominant types of land degradation are water and wind erosion, decline in fertility, habitat destruction

[1] Gari, Lutfallah. "A History of the Hima Conservation System." Environment and History 12, no. 2 (May 2006): 213–28, The White Horse Press.

from over-grazing, unsustainable agricultural water management practices and over-exploitation of vegetative cover.[2] [3]
- Western protection models: The protection of land was not any longer done by social bonds and controls of local people but through exclusion of locals from any use of the land.

Protected areas are a key deliverable under the Convention of Biological Diversity's programme. They provide:
- shelter for species and natural ecological processes,
- restoration of damaged ecosystems,
- benefits from increased genetic potential of species (economic values and ecosystem services)

The first attempts to revitalise the Hima concept and the role of Islam in nature conservation were part of an emerging paradigm shift from conservation in large parks to local community-based conservation. Starting in Lebanon, a focus on important areas for vulnerable and endangered bird species led to the foundation of the Hima Fund, which established Himas for bird habitats in the west Asia region. Later, the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) together with partners has established four Hima sites in Jordan with a focus on sustainable rangeland management, poverty reduction and women group's participation along the Zarqa river. The success of these were mainly based on the individual assessment of local stakeholders' needs and incentives to get involved in design, implementation and maintenance of the Himas. Community governance is key for successful implementation of Himas and diverse local circumstances reflect the diversity of approaches.[4]

Benefits of Hima systems

The benefits of this approach are, among others, empowerment of local population, public participation, equitable use and sharing, preservation of indigenous knowledge, local customs and recognition of customary rights. Additionally, Himas play a role as seed banks and in halting and reversing desertification. An IUCN study with a Total Economic Value approach estimated the economic value of Jordanian rangelands managed as Himas to be JOD 136 million. This study included direct and indirect values of rehabilitated rangeland, including grazing, medicinal plants, water recharge and reduced sedimentation in dams.

HIMA systems have implications on conservation of biodiversity and sustainable use of renewable natural resources, not only for the WANA region but throughout the Islamic world and in principle for all dryland ecosystems.[5] [6] [7]

Future steps and challenges

The Kuwait Institute for Scientific Research (KISR) initiated the Biodiversity for Terrestrial Ecosystems Programme and collaborates with different organisations and institutions around the globe. During a workshop organised by KISR, two experts identified future steps and challenges:

It is important to scale up work on the ground, to develop practice and implement, strengthen Hima to be able to revive the concept. This way, it is possible to formulate concrete messages, policy recommendations and advice.[8]

One of the challenges lies in the question how to bring the governance of the Hima system to the national, regional and international level. There is a need to concentrate on the creation of platforms for interaction between implementers and national policy makers. Because of misunderstanding or ignorance of rules and regulations and lack of their implementation compared to the efficient Hima management by locals, it is important to bring policy makers and implementers together. The goal is (a) to create a common understanding, because often locals are not aware of government regulations and (b) to identify advocates within government and policy making processes to become champions of Hima governance systems within their countries and on international level to make it a truly global inititative.[9]

About the author

Sebastian holds a B.A. in Geography and Political Science and a M.Sc. in Integrated Water Resources Management. He had further education in Permaculture and Agroforestry system design.

[2] Lutfallah Gari. "A History of the Hima Conservation System." Environment and History 12, no. 2: 213–28, The White Horse Press, 2006.

[3] ICARDA. Land Degradation in Jordan – Review of knowledge resources. OASIS country report 1, 2012.

[4] SPNL, BirdLife International and Aage von Jensen Charity Foundation. The involvement of Local Conservation Groups in IBA conservation in the Himas of Lebanon, Lebanon, 2010.

[5] IUCN and SPNL. Al HIMA, A Way of life, Society for the Protection of Nature and Natural Resources, Beirut, 2007.

[6] IUCN. Natural Resource Economic Valuations - Environmental Economic Valuation of the HIMA System. The Case of Zarqa River Basin – Jordan, no year.

[7] De Groot et al., Benefits of Investing in Ecosystem Restoration, 2013.

[8] Dr. Jonathan Davies (IUCN coordinator Global Drylands Initiative).

[9] Dr. Richard Thomas (UNU-INWEH, Assistant Director for Dryland Ecosystems Programme).