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Does Dana Biosphere Reserve, Jordan, Constitute a Green Grab?

In 2021 I undertook a placement with the Dana and Al-Qadisiyah Local Community Cooperative (DQLCC), southern Jordan, to research the impacts of the Dana Biosphere Reserve (DBR) on local communities. Throughout my master's in environmental change and international development, at the University of Sheffield, my interest in the relationship between people and the environment grew and culminated in this dissertation project investigating green grabbing.

Green grabbing is the appropriation of land without considering the needs or perspectives of local communities. This conflicts with participatory, or 'social ecology' models of conservation that see local communities as integral to protecting the environment. Biosphere reserves are an example of a social ecology model, however, the establishment of the DBR caused local people to form the DQLCC in response to consequent social justice issues, such as the loss of their customary land.

The aim of my research was to determine whether the DBR constitutes a green grab through three key objectives: an assessment of changes in land tenure caused by the implementation of the DBR, uncovering the associated social, economic, and cultural impacts on local people, and understanding power dynamics through the roles of different players in the DBR.

Despite the difficulties of conducting international research during a global pandemic, the TAAF award allowed me to fund a research assistant and translator on the ground.

The findings showed that local people greatly value their customary land in a multitude of ways, individually, as a community, for its physical uses and cultural importance. The findings also strongly suggest that the management of DBR and related socioeconomic projects too often exclude local people and perpetuate inequalities.

Consequently, I reached the conclusion that the DBR constitutes a green grab and learned that what may appear to be socially just environmental governance is a different story in practice. To enhance sustainable development and participation, I suggested that the DQLCC take several actions. This included increasing the cooperative's capacity to advocate for regaining control of customary land based on international laws and lobbying for increased inclusion in DBR management. I believe such actions can empower the local community and set an example for other communities facing the repercussions of green grabbing.

Apart from hugely enjoying the experience, I aim to use skills and knowledge I acquired throughout this project in a future career in the development sector.



A local shepherd and his sheep. Image courtesy of Lorraine Walker.