

MEDOMED. Network of Botanical Gardens in the Mediterranean and the Middle East

Fundación de Cultura Islámica. Madrid

In Granada in October 2008, the Madrid Islamic Culture Foundation presented the first international seminar of experts in the framework of the project “MEDOMED. Network of Botanical Gardens in the Mediterranean and the Middle East”. This, in its turn, forms part of a wide-ranging programme entitled “MEDOMED. Cultural Landscapes of the Mediterranean and the Middle East” which, along with the network of botanical gardens, covers an area on cultural heritage, another on botanical gardens and a third on education and training in these regions. The objective of the project is two-fold: on the one hand, it seeks to preserve gardens and publicise their scientific and cultural aspects; on the other, it is a tool to generate employment and integrate different social sectors.

Over centuries, human beings have modified the landscape, adapting it to their spiritual and material needs. Each civilisation has left a specific imprint on nature, conditioned by its cultural parameters, the climate and the biological diversity of its surroundings. These landscapes (parks, gardens, botanical gardens, vegetable gardens and crop fields) have in their turn shaped the personality of the populations, their way of life and how they relate to the planet. In this respect, Islamic civilisation showed for centuries a notable interest in nature, based on Koranic premises which urge it to be regarded as a source of knowledge. According to Islamic tradition, nature was created both as a source of spiritual inspiration and of sustenance. Due to this love for nature, throughout history Muslims designed beautiful gardens for pleasure,

which can still be seen in Spain, Syria, Turkey, Iran or the Maghreb. Moreover, they excelled in the creation of agrarian spaces, not only productive but also for experimentation and acclimatisation, particularly in al-Andalus, which were the precursors of the botanical gardens of the Renaissance. In these states both local and exotic species were cultivated, the result of their transfer and introduction from other eastern regions of the Mediterranean, North Africa and the Orient. This prompted a “green revolution” which allowed the intensive cultivation of vegetal species which would invigorate the economy, thereby enriching gastronomy, pharmacopoeia and the textile industry. This expansion was accompanied by an extraordinary development of agricultural and botanical knowledge, contained in the numerous geopon-

ic treatises written for centuries in Arabic. The historical acclimatisation gardens, respectful of the environment and nature, could at present serve as a response to the challenges faced by Humanity in terms of the use, management and conservation of biodiversity and traditional knowledge related to it.

Current Situation

However, despite finding all the foundations for the good management of natural resources in Islamic tradition, and despite the great richness of their landscape heritage, the countries with a Muslim majority in the Mediterranean basin have largely abandoned these concerns due to their current economic situation. The Mediterranean is faced with environmental problems which threaten all the states in the region such as lack of water, loss of natural heritage, pollution and the poor development of the rural environment. The botanical gardens in the southern and eastern Mediterranean do not have enough economic resources to contribute to the preservation of biodiversity and to carry out agronomic research which have an effect on the whole of the Mediterranean area. They suffer from the lack of specific legislation, awareness-raising plans and education actions for the population.

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The number of botanical gardens in the Mediterranean and the Middle East is very low and not enough to guarantee the conservation *in situ* and *ex situ* of the flora and phylogenetic resources. Neither does it fulfil the expectations in terms of their possible contribution to the

economic development of the region as a tourist and cultural resource.

At present, botanical gardens carry out an important function. To their dimension in terms of science, culture and the conservation of biodiversity must be added their role as an instrument in the fight against poverty through professional training, the generation of employment and stimulating the integration of all social sectors. The networking of environmental and cultural agents in the Mediterranean and eastern areas through the “MEDOMED. Cultural Landscapes of the Mediterranean and the Middle East” project involves joining efforts to increase the activity and exchanges in conservation, research and education in this part of the world. The project, which has already started in several countries in the Mediterranean area, focuses on the recovery, from an architectural and botanical point of view, of historical botanical gardens and of gardens from the Islamic period or style which have fallen into disuse. Moreover, we should emphasise the creation of completely new botanical gardens, with new design and fresh commitment, and the exchange and cooperation between already existing botanical gardens in the Mediterranean and the Middle East.

Activities

The Islamic Culture Foundation, through the MEDOMED Network, has already set out actions in several countries in the Mediterranean area in partnership with other institutions. In Morocco it is participating in the rehabilitation of the Jardin d’Essais Botaniques in Rabat: an early 20th century acclimatisation garden designed by the great French landscape-architect Jean-Claude Nicolas Forestier. Along with providing scientific advice in terms of management, botanical collections and landscape restoration, the Islamic Culture

Foundation has designed a completely new al-Andalus Garden, which recovers both the vegetal species used in Muslim Spain and the morphology, irrigation system and philosophy of the gardens of that time. In this same venue, it has carried out a project for the restoration of the old Neo-Morisco Pavilion, with cultural and educational purposes and, together with the Association Maroc, Nature et Culture, has designed the “Garden of the Senses”, adapted and accessible for the handicapped.

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In the monumental city of Aleppo, in Syria, the City Council has ceded to the Islamic Culture Foundation a piece of land of 2,500 square metres, within the Assabil public park, for the creation of a garden of al-Andalus inspiration from the landscape and botanical point of view, where there are plans to set up a nature classroom with a permanent exhibition on the al-Andalus garden, and all kinds of temporary workshops. Moreover, the Foundation is collaborating with Al-Quds University in Jerusalem on the construction of an al-Andalus botanical

garden, which will occupy a piece of land next to the Faculty of Science and Technology. In this garden it is planned to set up a botanic library, a seed bank and a herbarium. The library sources will pay special attention to the history of science in al-Andalus.

For its networking, MEDOMED has a scientific team directed by the President of the Fundación de Cultura Islámica, Cherif Abderahman Jah, made up by experts in heritage, the management of botanical gardens, botany, the environment and education. Leading the scientific team is Esteban Hernández Bermejo, specialist in management of botanical gardens and germoplasm banks, from the University of Cordoba and the University of Castilla-La Mancha, and Antonio Almagro, research architect from the Escuela de Estudios Árabes (Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas). It also has the collaboration of several national and international institutions, such as the Spanish Ministry of the Environment and Rural and Marine Affairs, the Union for the Conservation of Nature, the University of Castilla-La Mancha, the International Council of Monuments and Sites, the Institut National de la Recherche Agronomique in Morocco and the Fondation Mohammed VI pour la Protection de l'Environnement, among others.