



Desertification



It has been said that forests came before human beings, deserts followed them. Desertification is becoming a major problem as more and more of the world's land surface is turned into desert. The new deserts which are being created are not necessarily hot, dry sandy places, but are instead any areas where the soil has been so mistreated by humans that it is now useless for growing crops. You may think that this doesn't affect us here in Britain, after all, it's too wet and cold for a desert to be formed here. That may be true, but that doesn't mean that desertification won't affect us. Think about it. If our soil is not conserved, then our food supply and all our lives are threatened.

Soils can be ruined easily in areas where seasonal rainfall is unreliable. Cutting down forests and trees, over-cultivation of the soil and over-grazing can all contribute to desertification. In poorer countries, farmers often know what needs to be done, but they and their families live so near to starvation that they cannot even afford to buy what they need to keep their families healthy, let alone attempt to solve their problems.

In Europe and America too, some farmers have not acted wisely. They have sprayed their soils with chemicals to improve their crop yields. In many cases, the seeds they sow have been specially bred by a particular company to grow best when fed with the same company's fertiliser. Soils have become dusty and are blown away by the wind, as they need natural fertilisers, rest from continual planting, and trees to shelter them from the wind.

But it is in Africa and India where the problems of desertification are worst. Here, the soils are often poorly-managed, which means that they store less water and produce less grain even when there is enough rainfall. This means that if there is a drought, the people have no stores of food to fall back on, as their soils do not produce surplus grain even in a good year. Perhaps only twelve of the fifty-one African countries are able to feed themselves. The population of Africa is increasing, and is set to double every twenty-four years, whilst the amount of food being produced to feed each person is falling.



So just how big a problem is desertification? Estimates suggest that 35% of the earth's land surface is at risk, and the livelihoods of 850 million people are directly affected. 75% of the world's drier lands - 45,000,000 square kilometres are affected by desertification, and every year 6,000,000 hectares of agricultural land are lost and become virtual desert. The Sahara is thought to be advancing southwards by about 5-10 kilometres per year, which is a very considerable amount, when you remember that the Sahara is 5,150 kilometres across at its widest point.

The United Nations Environment Programme has estimated that 4.5 billion dollars will need to be spent every year for the next twenty years to prevent the process of desertification. It was not possible to reverse desertification in the twentieth century, but it should be possible to do so in this century, if the peoples of the world are prepared to unite and fight against the encroaching deserts.

The fight will have to begin facing the conflict between cash and crops. Many of the countries which are suffering from desertification are poor. This means that their governments are keen to exploit the soil to grow crops which they can sell to richer countries. With the foreign currency they are able to buy machinery that they cannot produce themselves.

The problem with this strategy is that more and more land gets used for cash crops, meaning that forests are destroyed to make way for more cultivation. Forest soils are often unsuitable for growing crops, and so turn into desert within a few years. Also, as more cash crops are grown, less land is used to grow crops to feed the people who live there. The balance needs to be changed so that less crops are grown for cash.

There is also pressure to grow crops on the same land, year after year. Chemical sprays used on the soil may keep yields high, but they do so in a totally unnatural way. Without rest, soils become dusty, and will start to blow away. They need organic matter such as manure to maintain their richness, and this is not provided by chemical sprays.

There is now a growing interest in a more natural, organic, method of growing our food. More and more people are demanding food - meat, vegetables and fruit - which is not contaminated with potentially dangerous chemicals or grown with artificial fertilisers. There is not room here to discuss all the issues.

You may well feel that you can do little to help fight desertification, but you have already taken the first step. You can't solve a problem until you know it exists, so by reading this fact sheet, you have become one of an increasing number of people who are aware that a great deal of our soil is under threat. Now that you know that desertification is happening, try to find out more about it, and about what needs to be done to prevent it.

