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Orans in Peril

May 21, 2024

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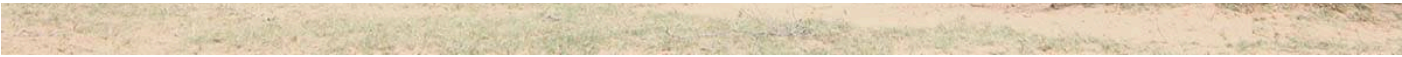
In Rajasthan, agro-pastoralists defend their sacred landscapes from “green” development.

WORDS AND IMAGES Rudrath Avinashi



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A woman from a nearby village collects firewood in the oran, only from trees that fall naturally due to storms, as tree felling is not allowed.

Orans are sacred landscapes that are conserved by Indigenous and local agropastoral communities in Rajasthan. They mostly encompass arid and semiarid regions of Rajasthan and are now gaining recognition as biodiversity hotspots in the region. Their sacred character stems from the people's shared belief in a local deity along with the sanctity they attribute to the environment. In other words, the governance system of the orans emanates from the sacredness of the area and the perceived need to conserve it. At the same time, the conservation practices and rules are tightly intertwined with the communities' livelihoods, which enables a self-sustained ecosystem.

Despite sustaining these territories of life over centuries, in recent years the communities have faced constant threats from external development pressures and are fighting to save their lands, biodiversity, traditional ways of being, and identities.

This photo essay presents a snapshot of the people, landscape, biodiversity, and issues that surround numerous orans in western Rajasthan, particularly around the ancient princely state of Jaisalmer.

First, we zero in on the people, who are the custodians of the land, and provide a glimpse of the activities they undertake in the orans. According to the rules of the oran, no one is allowed to cut trees for any purpose, although one is allowed to take firewood in a regulated way from naturally fallen trees.

In particular, we focus on Degrai Mata ka Oran, where we see Sumer Singh, one of the many community leaders who is spearheading advocacy for the conservation of orans. We also see Achla Ram and Manohar, each of whom carries a story. Manohar's story is that of a younger pastoralist trying to sustain his way of being. Achla Ram is an Elder who has engaged with the

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sustain his way of being. Achha Ram is an elder who has engaged with the landscape from his childhood and recalls the oran being so dense that just about fifty years back “one could not see someone else even if they walked less than fifty meters ahead of you.”

“

The governance system of the orans emanates from the sacredness of the area and the perceived need to conserve it.

”

The Degrai Oran sustains an intricate network of social, economic, cultural, and ecological relations between humans and non-humans. It is also reflected in the way the community takes care of endangered species such as the desert cat, which we see in the photo essay.

While Degrai has been successful in warding off the encroaching threat of windmills, the same is not the case with other orans in the region. There may be a variety of reasons, relating to inter-community conflicts or strong leadership in the neighboring villages within each oran. The more important issue, however, is that the increasing move toward “green” energy comes at the cost of the breakdown of social relations that have thrived for centuries.

Now, young people also see value in selling their livestock and taking up other livelihoods such as driving taxis and delivering goods. The story of orans in western Rajasthan is a story of local communities wanting to save their lands and identity, but external forces are becoming increasingly stronger, and without alternative livelihoods, young people are reluctant to continue with their traditional customs and practices.

Although the local communities are coming together to advocate for the conservation of these sacred landscapes, the current prospects of orans will also depend on the goodwill of communities to come together and on the willingness of those in positions of influence to seek better ways of implementing renewable sources of energy.

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Sumer Singh Bhati, a farmer and herder from Sanwata village, carries a bowl of freshly sourced camel milk and proceeds to a conversation over tea.





Manohar, a pastoralist from the Raika community, prepares to make tea. Often he subsists on camel milk only.

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The landscape of Degrai Mata ka Oran in Jaisalmer, Rajasthan, as seen from the highest elevation point, with high-powered transmission lines towering in the backdrop.



Three Indian courses, in addition to many other birds, grace the sacred landscape of Degrai Oran.

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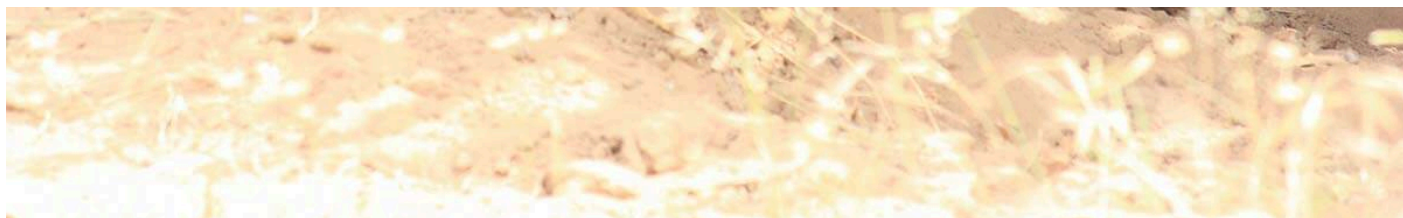


Degrai Oran is home to thousands of camels. The oran provides rich and adequate fodder for all livestock.



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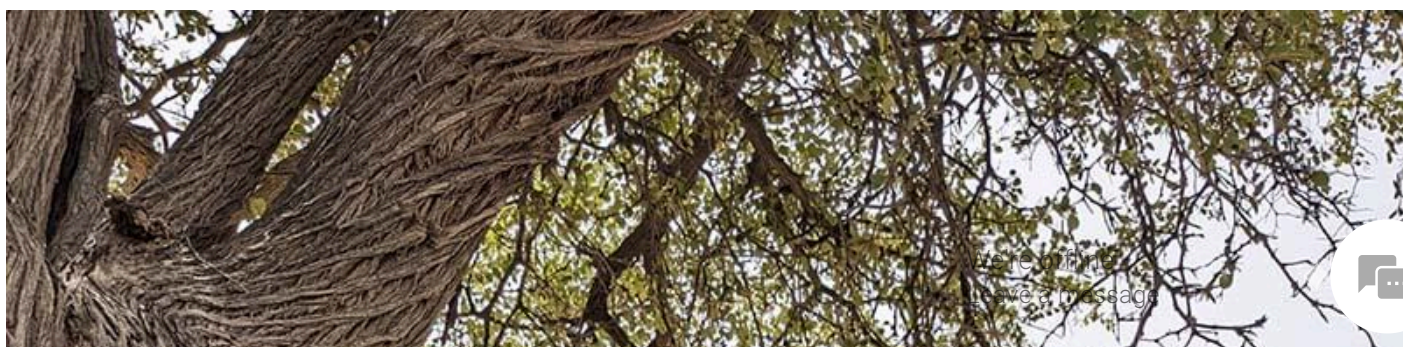




A desert cat, an endangered species, hides under a huge cactus tree.

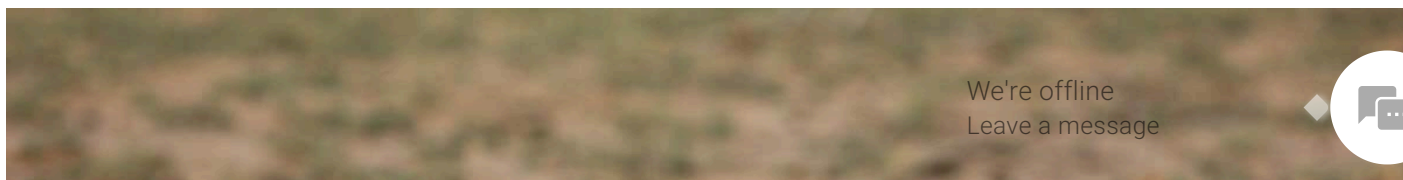


Sumer Singh takes some locally grown vegetables from his field for dinner. He farms through intercropping methods to meet his subsistence needs.





Achla Ram, an Elder and an agropastoralist, has seen the evolution of the Degrai Oran. On a hot day, he sits peacefully and smokes his pot.





A monitor lizard comes out to prey on spiny-tailed lizards during the day and will go back inside its hole during the evening.



A sacred pond inside the Veer Aala ji Oran is home to a variety of species. Windmills are rapidly spreading and occupying the land.



A herd of sheep graze around the pond in Dungar Pir Oran. According to the locals, the people were baited with monetary incentives to install windmills.





A young pastoralist from Dungar Pir Oran prepares tea and ponders over the future of his livestock and alternative livelihoods.

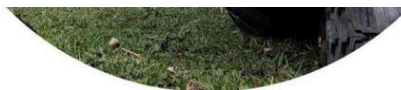
Support the Cause: *The pastoralist communities in western Rajasthan seek the protection of their sacred landscapes from threats of external development, such as solar and wind energy projects. Read more at **ICCA Consortium** (<https://www.iccaconsortium.org/2021/02/27/orans-rajasthan-india/>).*

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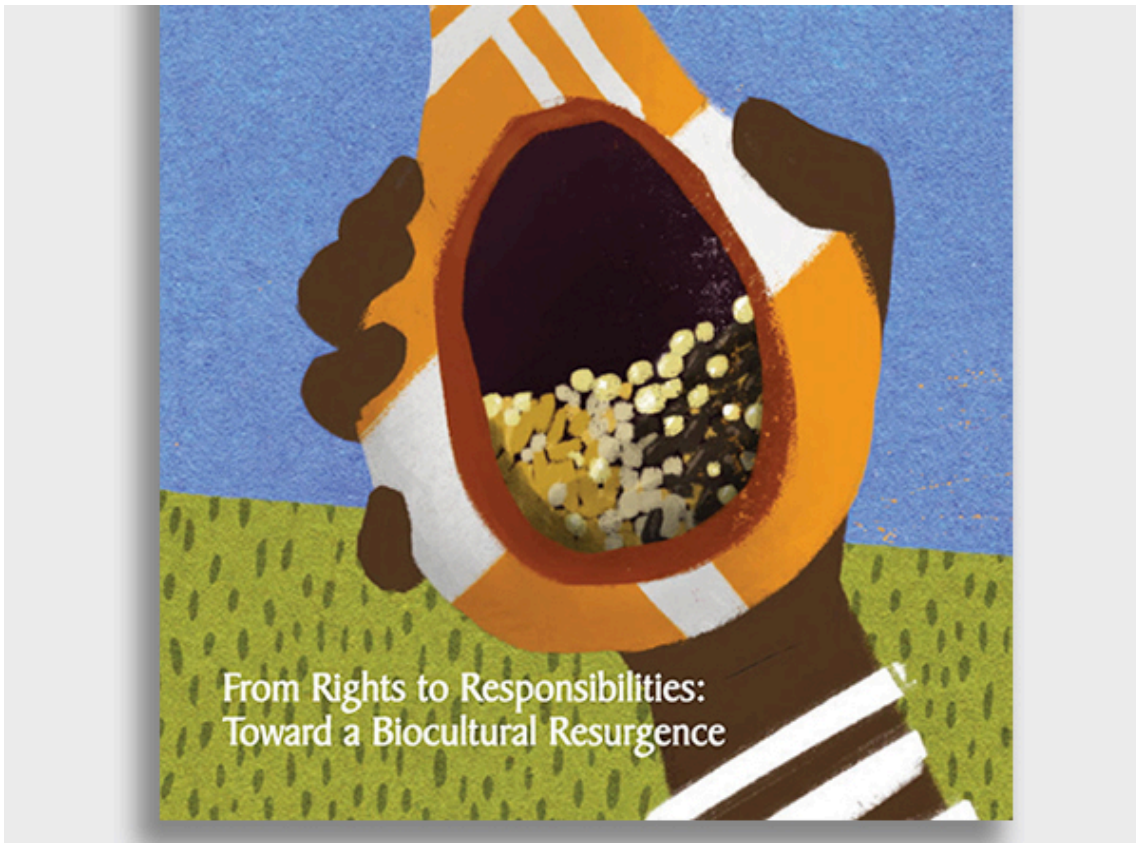
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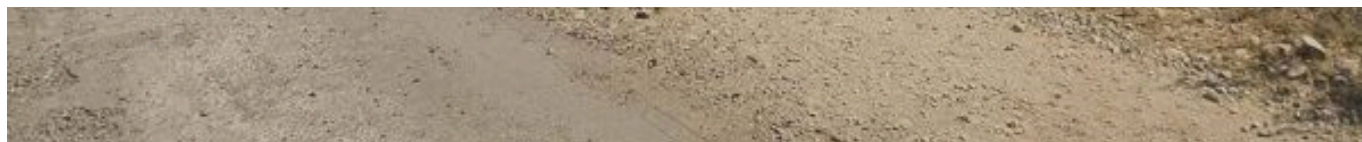
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