
Conference aims to share UAE expertise on date palm plantation Insight

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If there was a symbol representing Arabia, it may very well be the date palm.

The statuesque fruit-bearing tree lines every street, every nook, and every garden, even in the remotest areas of the UAE. Historically, the blessed tree has enabled both animals and wildlife to thrive for thousands of years.

The date palm is closely intertwined with the local culture of the UAE and the very fabric of society was built around it. Early existing villages blossomed thanks to the date palm. When there was no shade to grow delicate crops, the date palm provided shelter. When fishermen needed material to build their boats, the dried out parts of date palm offered sturdy building material. When there was no food, the succulent dates satiated parched and hungry mouths.

With the formation of the federation in the seventies and its subsequent expansion, the palm tree remained a staple resource. In a bid to conserve and prove its importance, the third edition of the International Date Palm Conference (IDPC) was held between February 19 and 21. The conference was held under the patronage of President His Highness Shaikh Khalifa Bin Zayed Al Nahyan.

Time to update

This year's IDPC was on 'New Dimensions and Challenges for Sustainable Date Palm Production: From Farm to Fork'. Organised by the UAE University, in cooperation with the Ministry of Environment and Water and Al Foah Date Palm Development Sector Company, the objectives of the conference were to provide an opportunity for updating scientific information on the different aspects of date palm production, to compare recent experiences in the UAE with those of other date-growing countries, and to foster international technical cooperation.

"The UAE is known for date palms," said Dr Helal Humaid Al Ka'abi, National Project Director, Plant Tissue Culture Laboratory at UAE University. "In 1971, there were only a few million date palms in the country. As a result of a strategy drawn out by the late Shaikh Zayed, there has been a very significant increase in the number of palm trees, as there are now over 35 million trees. The UAE is considered the leading country in the date palm field. There are no boundaries to the importance given to date palms in the UAE; nowhere else in the world is the government so involved in this field."

Prof Abdul Ouahab Zaid of UAE University is the Chairman of the organising committee of the third IDPC. The UAE is the sixth largest date producer in the world and contributes six per cent to the world's production.

It's no surprise then that the IDPC would be held here. The first two editions, held in 1998 and 2001, took place in Al Ain.

The third edition in Abu Dhabi had over 400 participants from 40 countries. One hundred and fifteen research papers were presented by speakers from Sudan, Australia, Costa Rica and Saudi Arabia among others.

Areas under focus

Australian delegates Travis Gotch and Anita Reilly attended the meet on their first visit to the UAE. "There's very little knowledge on date palm cultivation or management techniques in Australia, so we've learned heaps," said Gotch.

Reilly, who works on a date palm plantation in Australia, also found the IDPC useful. "The Australian date industry is still fairly small and fairly young. A lot of people are looking for direction, and they're looking to us, so our government has sent us here to learn more."

Discussions included those on the current status of date palm cultivation in the world, tissue culture technology, trends in pest and disease control, new food products made from dates, and new technologies related to the cultivation of date palm trees.