

Reflections on my Journey

From my talks with the desert experts of Rajasthan and subsequent travel in and around Jodhpur and Jaisalmer, I learned of the differences between the deserts I know in the Americas and the desert of Rajasthan. While climate and latitude are similar, the effect of livestock on the desert has resulted in extraordinary differences. Livestock arrived in the Americas with the Spaniards in the sixteenth century. Cattle arrived in the Sonoran Desert in the early seventeenth century. In other words, in the desert with which I am most familiar, cattle have a history of only four hundred years. In contrast, the presence of livestock in Rajasthan dates back at least four thousand years. Peoples and cultures have been closely involved with cattle, goats, camels, and, probably horses, for millennia.

This difference, combined with a heritage of conquest and the evolution of religions over the millennia, has made for a cultural richness that transcends anything I have encountered in the Americas. Livestock management in itself entails vast knowledge of desert plants and their human uses. As a case in point, the deep history of the broom being researched in the Arna-Jharna Museum entails a profound familiarity with native grasses and shrubs amenable to inclusion in broom production. This knowledge cannot be separated from the caste groups that produce and make the brooms. This combination and its ramifications make for a social complexity beyond anything I have previously experienced.

Thank you once again for providing me with an opportunity to share my knowledge of American deserts and to learn of the complex, ancient, and rich cultural and ecological conditions of Rajasthan.