

Joint interdisciplinary Study Tour – Oman 2007
“Sustainable land- and resource use between tradition and modernity”
(February 24th – March 10th 2007)

Visit to the Royal Horse Stables, 27th Feb 2007

(Summary 03, Christian Beuter)

On the third day of the Study Tour the group of students and lecturers got the chance to visit the Royal Horse Stables of His Majesty Sultan Qaboos bin Said bin Taimur Al Said. Arrived at 9 am at the entrance gate the group was guided for around 2 hours through the different sections of the horse stables whereas the focus laid on the racing horses and the beauty horses.

The Stables in general

The Royal Stables located not far to the west of Oman’s capital Muscat were created in 1992. Today the Stables are managed and directed by Omani and international horse experts; the German group was guided mainly by a British director, a Greek veterinary and an Omani senior jockey.

The stables provide services, especially veterinary, also for other livestock sections (cows, sheep, goats, ostriches, turtles and others) on Royal farms and His Majesty’s zoos (mostly birds).

International guests come to visit the stables: frequently Japanese, German and French guests are invited.

While the major horse breeding work is done in the Royal Stud Farm in Salalah (South Oman) mostly with the technique of artificial insemination (AI) the Royal Stables in the north accommodate ca. 1,400 horses. With a big financial support by His Majesty the stables are able to breed in different directions and select the best horses for tournaments. A main emphasis is laid on the breeding of traditional Arab horses, but different types of European horses are bred as well. The main and obvious difference between those two provenances is the head-shape: small, slim and convex in Arab horses, big and straight in European ones (see also figure1).



Figure 1. Head shape of an Arab horse (left) and an European horse (right)

Due to the vast extended area of the stables and courses in total there are many possibilities to work with the horses in different ways. The stables are located proximate to the sea which gives the staff members the possibility to train the horses at the beach as well as cooling them in the sea water when the weather conditions get too hot. Additionally some boxes are

prepared with air condition and the horses are cooled down with freshwater, especially the racing horses.

Today the boxes are bedded with paper instead of straw which is too expensive in Oman. But since the paper is often eaten by the horses and causes in some cases colic it is planned to replace the paper by wood-chips in future.

All horses in the Royal Stables are marked with implanted microchips in the neck. That technique is nowadays international standard for tournament horses and brandings on the legs or the hooves are old fashioned.

Racing Horses

Within the area of the Royal Stables a race course extending 2 km is installed. Royal horses compete with other Omani horses as well as with international studs, such coming mainly from other Arabian countries like Saudi Arabia and the UA Emirates. Most of the carriages (the Sulkies) used in the races are made in Germany.

The senior jockey of the stable who is responsible for the training of the racing horses was worried most about the hot summers in Oman. As mentioned above the horses have to be watered in that time and no races are conducted in Oman between May and September. In these months occasionally some jockeys from the Royal Horse Stables go to train and race in cooler countries, e.g. in France (2002) or in Great Britain (2007). During the Racing Period (October – April) the best racing horses participate in competitions usually twice a month. There are big and well paid racings in the Arabian world, especially in Qatar and Dubai where prize money can exceed 180,000 US\$.

In the Omani Royal Stable there are 35 jockeys, four of them working professional. A jockey is usually asked to weigh not more than 56 to 58 kg otherwise he has to pay a fine of around 40 EUR / kg in races.

In former times horse breeders had their own recipes for the horse's nutrition. Today this art is outsourced to diet specialists, so, the special feed for the Royal horses comes from Europe.

Beauty Horses

According to one Omani staff member at the stables the breeding of beauty horses is not a matter of fashion. The criteria what makes a horse a beauty horse are rather traditional ones. First of all the shape of the head is very important: a slim head with big eyes is preferred. Further criteria the scoring judge looks at in tournaments are the type of the horse in general, the top line of the horse, the appearance of the horse's legs and of course the movement of the horse. The last criterion is a matter of intensive training. For example the horse has to learn how to extend the legs in different gaits and should show a straight line movement. Recently two women started to train horses for horse-dances.

In the Royal Stables the trainers begin the work with beauty horses at the age of two years. In total 15 people are employed in that section of the stables.

Tournaments and Shows

Besides the racing and the Beauty horses the Royal Stables keep also other varieties like dwarf horses, Rodeo horses, Polo horses, Circus horses and others. Every five years the Royal Equestrian Show is held in which all these different kinds are presented. In total 600 horses and 800 camels are shown during the three hours lasting event.

On the 1st of January the big Royal Races takes place annually. For nearly 2 hours Royal horses compete with other studs.