

Agriculture in Bahrain





Despite the rainfall and poor soil, Agriculture in Bahrain historically was an important sector of the economy. Before the development of the oil industry, date palm cultivation dominated Bahrain's agriculture, producing sufficient dates for both domestic consumption and export. At least twenty-three varieties of dates are grown, and the leaves, branches, buds, and flowers of the date palm also are used extensively. From the 1950s through the 1970s, changing food consumption habits, as well as the increasing salinity of the aquifers that served as irrigation sources, led to a gradual decline in date cultivation. By the 1980s, a significant number of palm groves had been replaced by new kinds of agricultural activities, including vegetable gardens, nurseries for trees and flowers, poultry production, and dairy farm.

By 1993 Bahrain's cultivated area had been reduced from 6,000 hectares before independence to 1,500 hectares. The cultivated land consists of about 10,000 plots ranging in size from a few square meters to four hectares. These plots are distributed among approximately 800 owners. A minority of large owners, including individuals and institutions, are absentee landlords who control about 60 percent of all cultivable land. The ruling Al Khalifa own the greatest number of plots, including the largest and most productive ones, although public information pertaining to the distribution of ownership among family members is not available. Absentee owners rent their plots to farmers, generally on the basis of three-year contracts. There are approximately 2,400 farmers, 70 percent of whom do not own the land they cultivate.

The small size of most plots and the maldistribution of ownership has tended to discourage private investment in agriculture. In addition, the number of skilled farmworkers progressively declined after 1975 because an increasing number of villagers obtained high-paying, nonagricultural jobs. Despite these impediments, official government policy since 1980 has aimed at expanding domestic production of crops through such programs as free distribution of seeds, technical assistance in adopting new and more efficient irrigation technologies, and low-interest credit.

Although these programs have contributed to significant increases in the production of eggs, milk, and vegetables, the circumscribed extent of Bahrain's cultivable area limits the island's potential productive capacity. Consequently, agricultural imports remain a permanent aspect of the country's international trade. In 1993 the main food imports included fruits, vegetables, meat, live animals (for slaughter), cereals, and dairy product.

The waters surrounding Bahrain traditionally have been rich in more than 200 varieties of [fish], many of which constitute a staple of the diet. Before the development of the oil industry, most males engaged in some form of fishing. In addition, the pearl industry constituted one of the most important bases of the island's wealth, and more than 2,000 pearling boats operated during the late 1920s. After 1935 both fishing and pearling as occupations steadily declined. Although the prospect of steady wages attracted many pearl divers to oil-related jobs, pearling was even more adversely affected by the development in Japan of the cultured pearl. By 1953 only twelve pearling boats remained, and these all disappeared within a decade. Fishing declined more gradually, but by the early 1970s fewer than 1,000 fishermen continued to ply their trade. Fewer fishermen meant less fish available in the market despite rising consumer demand, and this situation led to the annual importation of tons of fish to supplement the local catch. In 1981 the government launched a program to revitalize the fishing industry by introducing trawlers, motorizing the traditional dhows, expanding jetties, constructing cold storage facilities, and offering training courses on the use and maintenance of modern fishing equipment. These initiatives contributed to an increase in the total fish catch, which according to estimates of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, was 9,200 tons in 1989.

Pollution in the Persian Gulf became a problem in the 1970s. Shrimp in the northern gulf seemed particularly sensitive to marine pollution, and by 1979 they had almost disappeared from waters near Bahrain. Pollution was seriously aggravated in 1983 and again in 1991 by major oil slicks that emanated from war-damaged oil facilities and covered several thousand square kilometers of water in the northern Persian Gulf. The slicks were detrimental to the unique marine life in the vicinity of Bahrain, including coral reefs, sea turtles, dugongs (herbivorous sea mammals similar to manatees), oyster beds, numerous fish species, and water fowl. The oil slicks, especially those of 1991, adversely affected the fishing industry, but as of early 1993, marine biologists remained uncertain about the long-term ecological impact of the pollution.