**Nurturing the date palm tree, a symbol of civilization and resilience**

The international community’s adoption of the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda means that, together, we have chosen a path towards a world free of hunger and extreme poverty and where we will take better care of our planet.

Here in Abu Dhabi, we are reminded once more of the intrinsic relationship between sustainable agriculture practices and the resilience of human beings. FAO, for its part, is proud to partner with the Khalifa International Date Palm and Agricultural Innovation Award, a major initiative that has helped for many years to showcase the importance of the date palm tree.

The United Arab Emirates, like many other Arab countries, owes a lot of its development to a single tree, the date palm, whose origins can be traced back to the Neolithic era and is believed to have been cultivated since 4000 BCE. These unique plants can withstand high temperatures and harsh climatic conditions – the trunk stocks nutrients that allow the tree to resist drought.

Indeed, the date palm is amazing tree. All its parts -- fruit, trunk, leaves -- can be used and have an economic value. The tree provides food, fuel as well as material to make ropes for basketry and also to build houses. In particular, dates, the trees’ fruit, have unique nutritional properties. They provides instant energy and are rich in vitamin A, D, B1 as well as in fiber, magnesium and potassium.

Like other staple foods, such as wheat, rice and potato, dates have shaped culture and history. Easy to transport, dates are the perfect food for people living in the desert. Arab merchants first brought date palms to Spain during the rise of the Arab civilization in the Iberian Peninsula. Spanish missionaries later introduced date palms to the Americas, from Cuba to Mexico to California. In the words of the founder of the United Arab Emirates, Sheikh Zayed Bin Sultan Al Nahyan. “Give me agriculture, I will give you civilization”.

We owe a lot to the date palm and we need to nurture it. To do so we must start by raising greater awareness of its multiple benefits, but also regarding the ecologically delicate role which the oasis system plays in conserving biological diversity.

FAO has worked closely together to support the recognition of Al Ain and Liwa Oases as Globally Important Agricultural Heritage Systems (GIAHS) sites. These oases have joined a growing number of ecosystems formally recognized by FAO for their importance as repositories of genetic resources, biodiversity and cultural heritage.

FAO’s interest in date palm trees includes implementing more than 30 projects in over 25 countries in Asia and Africa over the past 30 years. These interventions -- varying from programmes to training activities, technical consultancies and projects -- aim at rehabilitating date palm production sectors affected by disasters and other shocks.

In particular they seek to address the alarming expansion of the Red Palm Weevil, the most destructive pest of date palms first detected in the Gulf region during the mid-eighties and which has significantly expanded westwards over the last three decades to cover almost all of the countries of the Near East and North Africa Region.

In addition to pest management, FAO is working with the UAE in creating the first ever land cover database integrated with date palm enumeration and estimation of water use of cropped lands.

FAO is also interested in -- and has the expertise to assist with -- further developing the date industry in the UAE aiming at identifying best practices that can be adopted by other countries in the region and regions of the world.

To the people of the region, date palms represent more than simply food; they are an integral part of your history and cultural identity. It is these values that we need to cultivate by nurturing the date palm tree.