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The Sustainability of the Plant Environment in the Prophetic Sunnah – A Contemporary Reading

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Abstract

The idea of this article is to study the texts of the Prophetic Sunnah and its stances that have shaped the approach to dealing with the plant environment. Its significance lies in highlighting the key aspects of the Sunnah's concern for the plant environment in both normal and exceptional circumstances. Both theoretically and practically. The article focuses on presenting the Prophetic Guidance related to the introduction of new plant resources, the preservation of their continuity and sustainability, and the warning against cutting down the Sidr Tree. Several findings emerged, the most notable of which include the profound concern of the Prophetic Sunnah for the plant environment, whether in its establishment or sustainability, and its pioneering role in addressing contemporary issues such as environmental sustainability and the culture of afforestation for the future. The Sunnah also lays the foundation for several noble values, including positivity, engaging in work without immediate expectations of results, prioritizing actions that benefit the public over those that serve individual interests, and valuing deeds with lasting impact after death. Additionally, the study proposes several recommendations, most notably the call for further research on food security in the Prophetic Sunnah.

Keywords: Environmental Sustainability, Plant Environment, Prophetic Sunnah, Prophet Muhammad, Contemporary Reading

Introduction

The texts of the Prophetic Sunnah and its stances vary in illustrating how to interact with all the environmental elements surrounding humans in their daily lives, particularly the plant environment. This environment holds a distinguished status in the texts of the Qur'an and the Prophetic Sunnah. An example of this is found in the Qur'an (Al-Fath: 29), where the likeness of Prophet Muhammad and his companions in the Gospel revealed to Prophet Jesus is compared to a crop that strengthens one another until its stalks stand firm, delighting the farmers with its strength, uprightness, cooperation, and harmony.

Additionally, Prophet Muhammad likened a Muslim, in terms of abundant goodness and continuous benefits, to the palm tree. This was conveyed in an engaging dialogue between him and his companions in the form of a riddle. On one occasion, the Prophet asked his companions: *"Amongst the trees, there is a tree, the leaves of which do not fall and is like a Muslim. Tell me the name of that tree."* (Sahih al-Bukhari 1/38, Hadith No. 131, 1422 AH). The companions initially assumed that the answer was one of the desert trees, but the Prophet informed them that the correct answer was *the date-palm tree*.

In light of this, it is not surprising that a scholar studying the Prophetic Sunnah finds a profound concern for all aspects of the plant environment, whether in terms of its formation, preservation, or sustainability. This concern extends to both ordinary circumstances and exceptional situations,

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such as wars and conflicts.

Many studies have discussed the environment in the Prophetic Sunnah in a broad sense, encompassing all its components. However, in this article, I have chosen to focus specifically on the texts and stances related to the plant environment, presenting a detailed and novel perspective that highlights these texts, analyzes them, and demonstrates their pioneering role in supporting crucial contemporary issues such as environmental sustainability and public benefit.

Definitions

Definition of Sustainability

Linguists have defined sustainability as: *"The pursuit of continuity, permanence, and endurance of something."*

(Arabic Language Academy, 1/305, 1972).

Definition of Environment

Researchers have provided a broad and comprehensive definition of the term environment, describing it as:

"Everything that surrounds humans in this universe, including tangible material phenomena and elements."

(Al-Najjar, p. 297, 1428 AH).

Definition of Plant Environment

The plant environment can be defined as:

"Everything that results from cultivating and planting the land, including vegetation, crops, agricultural produce, trees, palm trees, and more."

This environment holds a distinguished status for those engaged in it, placing them in a higher rank compared to other professions. This idea was highlighted by Abu Hayyan Al-Andalusi in his interpretation of the verse (Al-Baqarah: 261), where he stated: *"This verse indicates that agriculture is one of the most esteemed professions adopted by people, which is why Allah used it as an analogy."* (Abu Hayyan, Al-Bahr Al-Muhit, 2/657, 1420 AH).

Introducing New Plant Resources in the Prophetic Sunnah

Theoretical Guidelines for Introducing New Plant Resources in the Prophetic Sunnah

Prophet Muhammad encouraged the development of the plant environment, the expansion of vegetation, and the increase of green spaces. This encouragement is evident in his statement:

"Whoever has land should cultivate it himself or give it to his (Muslim) brother gratis; otherwise keep it uncultivated."

(Sahih al-Bukhari, 3/ 107, Hadith No. 2341, 1422 AH).

A careful analysis of this Prophetic directive reveals its dual benefits in promoting environmental sustainability, as it emphasizes:

The cultivation and development of the land in general.

The enhancement and expansion of the plant environment.

The Prophetic Sunnah also strongly encouraged the planting of palm trees and crops under all circumstances, even if the end of the world is imminent, to the extent that one may not expect the seeds to mature and bear fruit. This principle is evident in the Prophet's saying:

"If the Hour (The Day of Judgement) is about to be established and one of you has a seedling in his hand, if he can plant it before it occurs, let him plant it."

(Al-Bukhari, Al-Adab Al-Mufrad, p. 242, Hadith No. 479, 1998).

From this noble Prophetic guidance, several important values can be derived, including:

The value of positivity

The value of focusing solely on work—performing it with excellence and dedication, without waiting for immediate results or recognition.

Prophet Muhammad did not limit his concern for vegetation to mere appreciation; rather, he elevated it to a deeper level—considering it a crucial factor in environmental sustainability and the continuity of life for all living beings. This was clearly demonstrated in his instruction for every Muslim to increase plant cover, ensuring that plants serve as a source of sustenance for humans, birds, and animals. He further affirmed that such efforts would be counted as acts of charity, as indicated in his saying:

"There is none amongst the Muslims who plants a tree or sows seeds, and then a bird, or a person or an animal eats from it, but is regarded as a charitable gift for him."

(Sahih al-Bukhari, 3/ 103, Hadith No. 2320, 1422 AH).

Additionally, the Prophetic Sunnah encouraged the establishment of sustainable plant resources, reinforcing this encouragement by affirming that the reward for such deeds is not limited to a person's lifetime but continues even after their death. This serves as a great incentive to engage in environmental and community initiatives.

This principle is supported by the Prophet's statement:

"Seven deeds of a servant continue to be rewarded after his death while he is in his grave: knowledge to be learned, constructing a canal, digging a well, planting a date-palm tree, building a mosque, handing down a written copy of the Quran, and leaving a righteous child who seeks forgiveness for him after his death."

(Al-Mundhiri, Hadith No. 73, 1/140, 2000).

Upon examining this hadith, the following insights emerge:

- A. Among the seven mentioned deeds, planting a palm tree is included, underscoring the Prophet's emphasis on the sustainability of the plant environment and the promotion of afforestation for future generations.
- B. In this hadith, Prophet Muhammad prioritized actions that benefit the public over those that provide personal benefits, affirming the immense value of public welfare and community service in the Prophetic Sunnah. (Mazroaa, pp. 1213-1214, 2024)

Practical Applications of Introducing New Plant Resources in the Prophetic Sunnah

The Prophet Muhammad's approach to this matter was not limited to theoretical guidance alone; rather, it was accompanied by practical application and real-life application, as recorded in the Prophetic Sunnah. A notable example is the story of the noble companion Salman Al-Farsi when he was striving to attain his freedom. At the time, he was enslaved and had agreed with his master to gain his freedom in exchange for planting five hundred young date palms. If these palm trees took root and survived, Salman would be granted his freedom.

When Salman informed the Prophet Muhammad about this agreement, the Prophet asked him to notify him when he was ready to plant the young palm trees, saying: *"When you intend to plant them, let me know."* When Salman informed him, the Prophet personally went with him to assist in the planting. In fact, the Prophet himself planted all the young palm trees with his own blessed hands—except for one, which Salman planted. Salman later recounted this event, saying: *"The Prophet came and began planting them with his own hands, except for one, which I planted myself."* (Ahmed ibn Hanbal, Musnad, Hadith No. 23730, 39/ 134, 2001).

From this story, several key points can be deduced:

- A. The Prophet Muhammad's strong commitment to creating new plant resources.
- B. The connection between words and actions in the Prophetic Sunnah, demonstrating both theoretical guidance and practical application.
- C. The Prophet's humility and cooperation with his companions, engaging in labor alongside them.
- D. His deep concern for human freedom, his efforts to abolish human enslavement, and his dedication to freeing those in bondage.

As a natural result of these theoretical teachings and practical applications, the society of Medina became fully aware of the Prophet Muhammad's keen interest in the plant environment. Consequently, they would inform him when their fruits began to ripen and would send him some of the produce. The Prophet would respond positively by supplicating for increased blessings and abundance, saying: *"O Allah! Bless us in our fruits."* (Sahih Muslim, Hadith No. 3400, 4/ 116, 1334 AH).

Moreover, the Prophet would create an atmosphere of joy and delight among children witnessing the event. He would call the youngest child present and give them some of the fruit. Abu Huraira narrated: *"Then he called the smallest child he saw and gave him the fruits."* (Sahih Muslim, Hadith No. 3400, 4/ 116, 1334 AH).

In light of the previously mentioned texts and incidents, an important observation emerges: Islamic teachings are not confined to spiritual nourishment alone—such as guidance, faith, sincerity, and matters of the heart. Rather, Islam provides a comprehensive approach that includes both spiritual and physical nourishment. It emphasizes physical well-being, health, strength, and sustainability, reflecting its holistic concern for human life.

Preserving the Sustainability of the Plant Environment in the Prophetic Sunnah

The Prophetic Sunnah's Guidance on Preventing Environmental Corruption

Allah has informed us about those who destroy the plant environment and spread corruption on

Earth in general. He has made it clear that He does not love any form of corruption, as stated in Surah Al-Baqarah (2:205). This verse, in its broad meaning, encompasses all types of environmental corruption (Al-Qurtubi, 3/ 18, 1964).

Furthermore, Allah has issued a general prohibition against corruption on Earth, as evident in Surah Al-A'raf (7:56). This verse emphasizes that Allah has forbidden all forms of corruption, whether minor or major (Al-Qurtubi, 9/249, 1964).

Following this Qur'anic directive, the Prophet Muhammad established a fundamental principle forbidding any action that causes harm or destruction to any element of the universe—whether intentionally or unintentionally. This includes humans and their surrounding environment, particularly the plant ecosystem. The Prophet stated: *"There should be neither harming nor reciprocating harm."* (Ibn Majah, 430/3, Hadith No. 2340, 4303, 2009).

The Prophetic Warning against Cutting down Sidr Trees

The Prophet Muhammad issued a severe warning against cutting down the Sidr Tree (also known as Lote tree), stating that doing so would lead to divine punishment. He said: *"If anyone cuts the sidr-tree, Allah brings him headlong into Hell."* (Abu Dawood, Hadith No. 5239, 7/ 523, 2009).

The reasons behind this warning are as follows:

- A. Cutting down this tree deprives people of its shade, which provides protection from the intense heat of the sun.
- B. It also prevents people from benefiting from its fruit, which can serve as a source of nourishment for the hungry.
- C. This stern warning from the Prophet Muhammad highlights two significant points:
- D. The severity of violating public benefits and the importance of protecting resources that serve the community.
- E. The strong emphasis in the Prophetic Sunnah on preserving plant life, ensuring its continuity and sustainability.

The Prophetic Guidance on Preserving the Plant Environment during Wars

The Prophet Muhammad did not limit his directives on plant sustainability to times of peace; he also strictly prohibited the destruction of plant life during wars. This was evident in his instructions when bidding farewell to the army he sent to the Battle of Mu'tah, where he explicitly forbade cutting down trees or palm groves. He said to the soldiers: *"Do not cut down any fruit-bearing trees, and do not destroy any palm grove."* (Al-Bayhaqi, 18/302, Hadith No. 18207, 2011).

It is beneficial here to highlight the context of the Battle of (Mu'tah), during which the Prophet Muhammad issued this prohibition. The battle was initiated as a response to the assassination of Al-Harith ibn Umair, the Prophet's envoy, who was sent with a message to the ruler of the Byzantine Empire. He was unjustly killed by Sharhabeel ibn Amr Al-Ghassani (Ibn Hisham, 3/328, 1955). Consequently, the Prophet dispatched an army to Mu'tah and instructed them with the previously mentioned ethical war directives.

Despite the cause of this battle was the betrayal of the Prophet Muhammad's envoy—and it is well known that envoys and ambassadors are granted immunity from being killed, harmed, or

deceived—the Prophet’s directives remained highly disciplined and deeply humane. His commitment to environmental sustainability was evident in his words: *"Do not cut down any fruit-bearing trees, and do not destroy any palm grove."*

From this noble Prophetic instruction, the following insights can be derived:

- A. Sharia that emphasizes the sustainability of plant life even during wars must be even more committed to preserving vegetation in times of peace.
- B. The Prophet’s words “Do not cut down any tree” could have been sufficient as a general directive. However, his immediate follow-up with “nor destroy any palm grove” suggests the following:
- C. It reinforces the Sunnah’s strong emphasis on preserving plant life.
- D. It serves as a strict warning against harming any component of the plant environment during wars.
- E. Based on the discussion in this article, the sayings and actions of the Prophetic Sunnah concerning plant life have focused on two key aspects:
- F. The encouragement of expanding green spaces and establishing diverse and sustainable tree covers.
- G. A profound commitment to ensuring the sustainability of all forms of plant life, whether in normal circumstances or exceptional situations.
- H. This further affirms the societal responsibility upheld by King Faisal University, which has chosen food security and environmental sustainability as its institutional identity.

Conclusion

In this article, I have explored the topic of sustaining plant life in the Prophetic Sunnah. Through this study, several significant findings and recommendations have emerged, which I summarize as follows:

Results

1. The distinguished status of plant life in Islam, as evidenced by Quranic and Prophetic texts that compare the Prophet Muhammad and his companions to cultivated plants and liken a Muslim to a Date Palm.
2. The profound concern of the Prophetic Sunnah for plant life, both in terms of its establishment and sustainability, whether in times of peace or war.
3. The pioneering role of the Prophetic Sunnah in addressing contemporary issues such as environmental sustainability, community partnership, public benefit, afforestation for future generations, and human freedom.
4. The Prophetic Sunnah’s emphasis on several noble values, including positivity, engaging in productive work without immediate expectation of results, prioritizing actions that benefit the public over those with private gain, and focusing on deeds that have a lasting impact beyond one’s lifetime.
5. The integration within the Prophetic Sunnah of both theoretical guidance and practical application, as well as spiritual nourishment alongside physical sustenance.

6. The Prophetic prohibition against corruption on Earth in general and the cutting down of the Sidr Tree in particular.

Recommendations

1. Encouraging the development of diverse studies on the concept of food security in the Prophetic Sunnah, ensuring they are both focused and relevant to contemporary discussions.
2. Presenting the Prophetic Sunnah in a new, engaging manner using accessible and relatable language to reach a broader audience.

Recognitions

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