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The International Year of Camelids: 2024 Heroes of Deserts and Highlands: Nourishing

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The year 2024 has been designated by the United Nations as the International Year of Camelids, shining a spotlight on these extraordinary animals and their significance to human societies across the globe. Camelids, including camels, llamas, alpacas, vicuñas, and guanacos, hold a special place in the hearts and histories of many cultures around the world. In recognition of their significance, the United Nations has designated 2024 as the International Year of Camelids. This global initiative aims to raise awareness about these unique animals, promote their conservation, and highlight their contributions to sustainable development. It aims to build awareness of the untapped potential of camelids and to call for increased investment in the camelid sector, advocating for greater research, capacity development and the use of innovative practices and technologies.

Why Camelids?

Camelids are members of the biological family Camelidae. There are seven existing members in this group. Camelids are divided into two groups, viz., Old-World Camelids and New World Camelids. Old World Camelids consist of Dromedary camel (*Camelus dromedarius*), Bactrian camel (*Camelus bactrianus*), and Wild Bactrian camel (*Camelus ferus*). In India, about three hundred double hump camels are present in the Nubra Valley of Ladakh. Llama (*Lama glama*), Alpaca (*Vicugna pacos*), Guanaco (*Lama guanicoe*), and Vicuña (*Vicugna vicugna*) are four members of New World Camelids. They are known for their remarkable adaptability to diverse environments, from the arid deserts where camels thrive to the high-altitude regions where alpacas and vicuñas roam. They have played crucial roles in the lives of people for centuries, serving as sources of transportation, food, fibre, and cultural symbolism.

Conservation Challenge: Despite their resilience, camelids face various challenges, including habitat loss, climate change, and poaching. The International Year of Camelids seeks to address these threats by promoting conservation efforts, sustainable

management practices, and research into their biology and ecology.

Cultural Significance: Camelids are deeply intertwined with the cultures and traditions of many societies. For example, camels have been essential companions for nomadic communities, providing transport and sustenance in harsh desert environments. Llamas and alpacas have been domesticated for their wool, which is prized for its softness and warmth. Vicuñas and guanacos hold spiritual significance for indigenous peoples in the Andes, where their wool is considered sacred.

Contributions to Sustainable Development: Camelids offer unique opportunities for sustainable development and play an important role in advancing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the UN on fight against hunger, eradication of extreme poverty, empowerment of women, and sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems. Their wool is an environmentally friendly alternative to synthetic fibers, promoting sustainable fashion and reducing carbon footprints. Camel milk and meat are nutritious sources of food, particularly valuable in arid regions where other livestock struggle to survive. Furthermore, camelids' ability to thrive in challenging environments makes them valuable assets for agricultural diversification and climate resilience

Educational and Cultural Events: Throughout the International Year of Camelids, a range of educational and cultural events will take place worldwide. These may include seminars, workshops, art exhibitions, and festivals celebrating camelid heritage. By engaging people of all ages and backgrounds, these activities aim to foster appreciation for camelids and inspire conservation action.

Importance of the International Year of Camelids for India

India is the home of rich camel genetic resources. There are nine breeds of camel registered by the ICAR-National Bureau of Animal Genetic Resources (ICAR-NBAGR). Other than the listed nine breeds, some other breeds are expected to be listed in future (e.g., Sindhi). Double-humped camel is also present in India in Nubra Valley of Ladakh. The International Year of Camelids can hold significant importance for India for several reasons:

Traditional Significance: In India, camels have deep cultural and traditional significance, especially in regions like Rajasthan where they are integral to the desert ecosystem and nomadic lifestyles.

Livelihoods: Camel rearing and related activities support livelihoods in many parts of India, providing income opportunities for communities involved in camel herding, transportation, and related industries.

Diverse Applications: Camels are versatile animals with diverse applications. They are used for transportation, milk production, and even as a source of income through tourism activities like camel safaris.

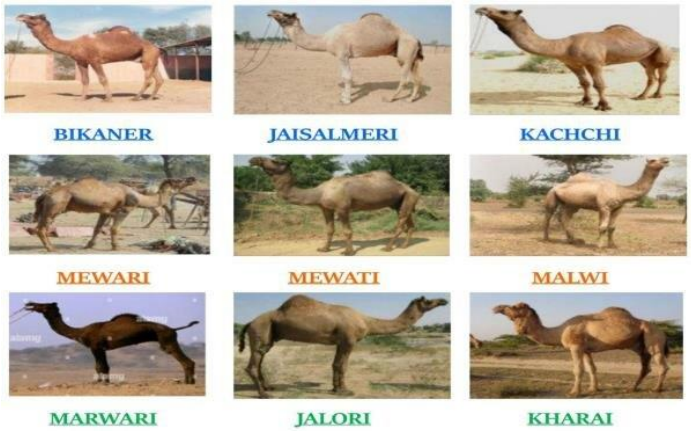
Resilience to Climate Change: Camels are known for their resilience to harsh environments, making them valuable assets in regions prone to climate change effects such as droughts or desertification.

Genetic Resources: India has several indigenous camel breeds that are adapted to local conditions. Recognizing the International Year of Camelids can promote conservation efforts and the sustainable use of these genetic resources.

Potential for Research and Innovation: The focus on camelids during this international year can also encourage research and innovation in areas such as camel milk processing, camel-based products, and the development of camel-based therapies.

Global Collaboration: Participation in the International Year of Camelids allows India to engage in global discussions, share knowledge and best practices, and collaborate with other countries on camelid-related initiatives, benefiting from international expertise and experiences.

Camels in Border Security: Camels are also important for the border security of India. The Border



Security Force (BSF) uses camels for patrolling the Indo-Pak border adjoining Rajasthan and Gujarat. Jaisalmer breed is used for this purpose. Recently, BSF introduced the first women camel riding squad which is the first of its kind in the world. The Indian Army has deployed double-humped camels for last-mile delivery of logistical support and for mounted patrolling.

Role of Camelids in Agriculture

Transportation: Camels have been used for centuries as pack animals in arid and desert regions. They can carry heavy loads over long distances, making them valuable for transporting goods and agricultural products in areas where other vehicles may struggle to navigate.

Dung as Fertilizer: Camel dung is rich in nutrients and has been traditionally used as fertilizer in agricultural practices. It helps improve soil fertility and structure, making it more suitable for farming.

Milk Production: Camels produce milk that is rich in nutrients and has unique properties, making it valuable for human consumption. Camel milk is often considered healthier than cow's milk in certain aspects and is used to make various dairy products.

Drought Resistance: Camels are well-adapted to arid and semi-arid environments, making them valuable in agricultural settings where water scarcity is a concern. They can survive on minimal water and food, making them resilient in harsh conditions.

Ploughing and Tilling: In some regions, camels are used for ploughing fields and tilling soil. Their strength and ability to work in challenging terrains make them suitable for tasks traditionally performed by tractors or other agricultural machinery.

Genetic Resources: Camels possess genetic traits that make them valuable for breeding programs aimed at developing livestock breeds that are more resilient to

heat, drought, and other environmental stresses. This genetic diversity is crucial for future agricultural sustainability in challenging climates.

Major Stakeholders and their roles in IYC-2024

Multiple players – government agencies, NGOs, private companies, local community-based organizations, research institutions – are engaged in evolving a congenial environment for the development of camel herders and camel entrepreneurs. Promoting camel conservation, utilising the camel for dairy and ecotourism purposes, organising capacity development of camel herders and camel entrepreneurs, developing market for camel milk and milk products, and developing public awareness about camel milk as a natural adjuvant is a herculean task. . NGOs, such as Lokhit Pashu Palak Sansthan (Pali, Rajasthan), Urmul Seemant Samiti (Bajju, Rajasthan), and Sahjeevan (Bhuj, Gujarat), are working for the empowerment of camel herders and the development of innovative camel milk-based products. ICAR-National Research Centre on Camel (ICAR_NRCC), Bikaner, has made a significant contribution through basic and applied research on camel including enhancing dairy potential of camel, developing molecular diagnostic tools for screening and diagnosis of camel diseases. ICAR-NRCC is utilising X (Twitter) (@IcarCamel), Facebook (NRC Camel), Instagram (nrcc_insta), YouTube Channel (ICAR-NRC on Camel), press releases and print media along with other traditional methods for dissemination of technology.

Conclusion

The International Year of Camelids (IYC) 2024 has been a significant milestone in highlighting the crucial role of camelids in agriculture and sustainable development. Through various events, discussions, and initiatives, IYC has brought attention to the unique contributions of camelids such as camels, llamas, and alpacas to food security, biodiversity conservation, and rural livelihoods. The year has provided a platform for promoting research, innovation, and partnerships aimed at harnessing the potential of camelids for addressing global challenges like climate change and food insecurity. As we conclude this remarkable year, it is evident that camelids will continue to play a vital role in shaping a resilient and sustainable future for agriculture and communities worldwide.

References

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