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SCIENCE WORLD

(a collection of development oriented science news briefs that may be used as a column, or as separate items)

GREENING EGYPT'S DESERTS (approx. 200 words)

One-third of the world's land surface is covered by deserts. In Egypt the problem is even more acute, with 96 percent of the land lost to arid sands. But now Egyptian scientists are leading a fight to recover some of that lost lant and turn it once again to agriculture and human settlements.

Desert resettlement is a high priority for the Egyptian government, and to help meet that goal a team of the country's leading researchers has been assembled. Their goal is to develop farming systems that can initially survive the harsh environment, and eventually can regenerate the soil and turn the desert green.

With the support of a grant from Canada's International Development Research Centre (IDRC), the team will work at two different desert locations over the next three years to establish a research, demonstration and training programme. Water and soil management, forestry, crop science, and animal husbandry will all be part of the complex project.

More than 100 countries are faced to some degree with the problem of spreading deserts. They will be watching Egypt's effort to turn the tide with keen interest, for if the desert can be beaten here, surely it can be beaten anywhere.

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WEEDS TO FEED FISH (approx. 170 words)

Water weeds can be a problem, clogging up waterways, and making life difficult for fishermen. But researchers in Thailand are hoping to turn the problem plants into a profitable product by chopping them up and using them as feed for fish farms.

Lake Songkla, Thailand's largest lake, is the site of the experiment. The lake, and an adjoining freshwater lagoon called Thale Noi contain huge number of aquatic plants that bloom all year round. Very little of this material is used, although local villagers harvest small amounts to feed their pigs.

With the aid of a grant from Canada's International Development Research Centre (IDRC), researchers from the Prince of Songkla University are studying both the plants and the fish in the lake. Later they will conduct intensive feeding trials on various fish species that will be raised in specially built cages.

Development of a successful fish farming industry here could do much to improve the living standards of the lakeside villagers in this, one of the least developed regions of Thailand.

THE PICKLEWEED POTENTIAL (approx. 180 words)

Every year about half a million acres of farmland are lost to agriculture because continual irrigation has caused the soil to become too salty for most plants. Since early farmers first learned to irrigate their fields it is estimated that one-quarter of all irrigated cropland has become too salty to farm.

But the land need not be lost. According to a report in Science 81

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a family of plants called halophytes may solve the problem, and could soon become an important food crop around the world.

Halophytes grow in sandy, salty soils, and can be irrigated with brackish water, even undiluted seawater. They go by names like saltwort and pickleweed, and some of them have been found to be comparable or even superior in both yield and nutritional value to rice and wheat.

Scientists at the University of Arizona's Environmental Research Laboratory are studying the plants and collecting samples from around the world to determine if halophyte agriculture is practical. The potential is staggering: in addition to tens of thousands of miles of desert coastline, estuarine swamps and tidal flats, there are perhaps one billion acres of desert overlying salty underground water sources.

THE RABBIT HABIT (approx. 180 words)

One of the biggest nutrition problems in many developing countries is lack of animal protein, particularly fresh meat. The solution for many could lie with that prolific little animal, the common rabbit.

Rabbits, which are thought to have originated in Africa, have been raised for their meat and fur in China for many years, and form a major industry in some rural areas there. Now their value is again being recognized on their native continent, in Ghana, where a high-powered promotional campaign -- part of a government programme to overcome that country's chronic meat shortage -- is urging people to "get the rabbit habit!"

Raising rabbits makes good sense. They take up very little space,

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require no special feeding or care, and they breed well in captivity. One pair will produce as many as eight young three or four times a year, and a full grown rabbit may weigh as much as 7 kilograms. Rabbit meat is similar to chicken, but generally less fatty, and their fur is a valuable by-product that can bring the backyard breeder a little extra "bunny money".

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