

Afghanistan Agriculture Information

The national ministry for agriculture and forestry in Afghanistan is the Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation, and Livestock (MAIL). There is a Department of Forestry within the ministry. The MAIL website is www.mail.gov.af. My contact within the forestry dept. is Ghayor Ahmad Ahmadyar (email: ghayor.ahmadyar@mail.gov.af). He is the head of the Protected Areas section, but he can put you in touch with the lead person for forestry. Please tell him that I gave you his contact information and said that he is a very knowledgeable and helpful person – personal contacts are very important in the Afghan culture. When you email him, first you should tell him that you would enjoy meeting him and inquire about the health and well-being of his family. Tell him that I send my regards by you. I spent three months working directly with Ghayor in 2006. The forestry dept also has foresters in the provinces (depending on where you are going) with whom you can make contact.

There is an Afghan forester friend of mine, Mohammad Ismail Nasri (email: nasrioria@yahoo.com), working with the Afghan Conservation Corps. He works for UNOPS. He is very knowledgeable about forestry and tree nurseries. Again, do the flowery and complimentary thing with Nasri as I outlined above when you email him. He and I did some technical forestry training workshops for the Dept of Forestry while I was in Kabul.

The USAID office in the US Embassy in Kabul had a forester on staff when I was there. That agency moves its employees around so much that he is probably not still there, but you can inquire.

There are USDA technical employees embedded in some of the PRT's as well. If you are lucky enough to have one of those available to you, they are quite a valuable resource for agricultural endeavors.

The Dept of Forestry does operate several small nurseries scattered out in the provinces from which you can probably get tree seedlings to plant if that is in your plans. It is best to ask for tree species native to Afghanistan because some NGO's have provided trees from other countries which are not native and may not do as well as the native ones. The soils are very alkaline for the most part, so you will need to know the pH requirements of the trees you want to plant to ensure their survival.

Tree planting and follow-up care is difficult work in Afghanistan. The mountainsides are terraced, and the trees are planted with shovels in small pits on the uphill side of the terraces. A slight depression is left around the tree because they are usually hand-watered for 3-5 years following planting. Quite often the watering is done by hand with buckets from water carried

on donkeys. The terraces help to keep any rain water around the trees as long as possible and give it a chance to soak into the soil. One thing I noticed immediately while watching the tree planting crews is that they don't take proper care of the trees prior to planting. They left bare-root trees lying in the open sunshine and wind. The tree roots should always be kept damp in some manner and never left lying in the sun before they are planted – otherwise you are planting dead trees. The tree planting season is in March.

The native rangelands are typically natural pistachio savannahs. Afghanistan used to be a big pistachio producer before the last 40 years of wars. The local councils of elders (shuras) don't seem to have the native natural resource management knowledge anymore – there are always exceptions to this, of course. They are traditionally the ones to tell the villagers when to move their sheep and goat flocks to new range and when to harvest the pistachios. The range lands are now typically overgrazed, and the villagers harvest the pistachios too soon (one village may sneak over to another's trees and break off branches of nuts and take them – causing quite a competition to be the first to harvest the green or barely ripe nuts and also causing a lot of damage to the trees). The overgrazed range also cause the livestock to eat any trees coming up from seed.

The large forests in the mountainous provinces are typically being poached and overharvested by the local warlords for personal profit. The timber typically is trucked to Pakistan without financial gain to Afghanistan itself. It has been difficult to deal with this since the warlords are, after all, warlords.

Afghanis use wood for both heat, light, and cooking, so overharvesting their dwindling forest resources is commonplace. Proper forest management techniques are needed. Maybe some scheme for alternate fuels might help the situation.

Most agriculture is done by hand and oxen labor with no mechanized equipment. It is still pretty primitive. I wondered while I was there if there would be potential for a farmer cooperative which might share hand tillers or a tractor among several farmers. Fuel affordability and availability would be the key there.

One big issue is irrigation. The former irrigation canals are slowly being cleaned out to serve the farmers again. The PRTs were working on that while I was there. New agricultural methods or ways of marketing ag products are valuable to the local population.

Switching from agriculture topics to culture again – here are some things that might help you to get along well with the Afghanis and make a good impression:

1. They are a very hospitable people. They will want to serve you food and infinite cups of tea (chai). If you don't currently drink hot tea, then you would do well to learn to like it.

You need to accept the food and drink so that you don't insult their hospitality. I did get stomach upsets sometimes from eating the food – grin and bear it. Thank them for the great hospitality when your meeting is done.

2. There is a lot of sitting on rugs on the floor. It is an insult to point the soles of your feet at them.
3. Do not touch an Afghan woman unless she offers to shake your hand (they rarely shake hands). Shake the men's hands without touching them with your left hand (left hands are traditionally for personal hygiene purposes). It is sometimes best to greet them with your right hand over your heart and say salaam. You will see close male friends and relatives hug each other a lot. Women hug only relatives.
4. Learning some words of Dari or Pashto can't hurt either. Which one you try for depends on the part of the country you are going to. Dari seems to be the primary language. Barnes and Noble has a book titled Beginning Dari Persian by Shaista Wahab if you want to pursue that. That is the one that I used.
5. Friday is holy day with no work, so plan meetings with Afghans around that day. Businesses will be closed. Some will close at noon on Thursday. Saturday is the first day of the work week.