

Counting on hemp to save Morocco's High Central Rif

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The Riffians live on tiny farms in a close tribal system of clans and kinship networks (photo: M. Brümmer)

By HempToday

If hemp can save Morocco's High Central Rif, maybe it truly can save the world.

Battered through centuries, the Riffians, who live on tiny farms in a close tribal system of clans and kinship networks, have fiercely fought state institutions, persevering most recently through Spanish attempts to colonize the Rif, a region of difficult geography and extreme climate conditions.

Now they've arrived at yet another challenge: A looming ecological meltdown brought on by deforestation. "Use of local forest wood for heating and cooking is decimating the tree population and leads to all the problems related to erosion," said Abdellatif Adebibe, president of the Targuist-based Confederation of Associations of Senhaja of the Rif for Development (CASRD).

Hemp is the key

That only speeds up ongoing deforestation due to overgrazing, forest fires, and the clearing of land to create cannabis plantations over the last several decades.

The crisis is deepened by generally poor local infrastructure, unsafe sanitary conditions and a lack of educational opportunities — making it not that difficult to envision yet more unrest among the fiercely independent Riffians, Adebibe said.

"The land means everything" to the tribes, Adebibe notes. "They won't leave it, so we're determined to bring them solutions," he said.

Key to that process is an economic development project based on hemp construction in which CASRD has teamed with German architect and hemp entrepreneur Monika Brümmer, founder and owner of Granada-based Cannabric, a maker and researcher of hemp-building materials.

Protecting nature, and traditional architecture

Brümmer wrote a master's thesis in architectural restoration focused on the High Central Rif in which she probed local building materials and generally assessed the economic potential of the region's cannabis straw in retrofit and for new buildings, as well as its export potential.

"The idea is to protect the architecture along with the culture," Brümmer said of the unique structures — some of them showing traces of hemp in their historic walls — in which the Riffians live. "Even the shape and positioning of the buildings are related to how the fields are located, and the organization of the work that creates products from the field," she said of the indigenous structures.

The goal is to adjust the Rif's latter-day cannabis-based economy that's currently dependent on region's strong, naturally occurring marijuana strains that are processed into kif, the highly potent form of cannabis usually pressed into hashish. While illegal in Morocco, kif production has meant survival to nearly 80,000 Riffian families — constantly prone, nonetheless, to criminal elements who pay the farmers little for their crop and reap huge profits around the world.

It's about the straw

That situation has prompted some Moroccan officials to call for laws that would continue a ban on recreational marijuana but license and regulate growers who redirect their output to medicinal and industrial cannabis products, which would be legalized.

Adebibe's group supports that movement, but it's the leftover straw from the pot plant, and not the flowers, that are at the center of his economic development plans. According to Brümmer, some 8,000 tons of straw go to waste annually in the region of High Central Rif — a figure roughly equal to 5% of hemp straw output currently in Europe. That material, based on her research and testing, is suitable for retrofitting the area's traditional farm dwellings and to build schools and other public buildings for the Riffians.

"There's also an opportunity to create briquettes and pellets for biomass fuel" to further cut down on the irreversible effects of harvesting from local forests, notes Adebibe, who envisions the flowering of small, interconnected businesses, jobs and export potential from the local cannabis straw.

Such development is critical to a culture based on big families, and which has very young demographics. With a population of 450,000, the High Central Rif is the most densely populated region of Morocco; average age is 15 years and a typical family has eight children.

"We think this is a viable economic alternative that will create direct and indirect jobs," said Adebibe, who said regional government officials are backing CASDR's initiative. "We want to combine the energy of those young people with material that just goes to waste now — to help them build a future for the region."

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