



Humans put lots of animals to work. Dogs fetch wild game, oxen plow fields, bees make honey, and goats climb argan trees to collect fruit.

Wait, what?

The tree-climbing goats gorge on argan fruits, digest the pulp, and expel the hard-shelled nuts by throwing up or defecating. Herders then collect the nuts, crack each one to harvest the kernel inside, crush the kernels into paste, and extract the argan oil.

The argan goat is as surprising as it is vital to the Moroccan economy and environment. The oil is sold around the world as a hair and skin softener, bringing in millions of dollars annually. Also, the trees have deep roots that hold soil in place. If not for the trees, the Sahara Desert would overtake their arid habitat.

The growing popularity of argan oil once threatened the trees, as large numbers of goats overgrazed the leaves and ate many saplings. Now, however, goats are carefully managed to reduce grazing pressure, and thousands of new trees are planted each year. Women's cooperatives support a sustainable argan industry while providing jobs that earn a decent wage.

In a way, the argan tree's story is repeated around the world: Animals eat fruits and disperse the seeds, minimizing competition between parent plants and their seedlings. But a closer look reveals the unique social, economic, and environmental impacts of the argan tree. As you will see, the world of biology is full of surprising connections.

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