Bahrain was once famed for its bountiful natural resources, primarily its extensive submarine springs which discharged fresh or brackish water into the saline waters of the Gulf. The once plentiful reserves of groundwater are now dwindling, and lowering of the water table has resulted in profound changes to the coastal geomorphology and land surface area over the course of the past few decades and very little remains of the original coastline in the northeast region of the Bahrain Islands. Over the centuries the coastline between Bahrain and the mainland has greatly extended. 

One of the Arabian legend says that the sweet water from Bahrain springs comes from the extension of Euphrates river which continues under the sea (Jenner 1984:10).

Summary

The submarine springs of Bahrain once supported the thriving pearl trade in Bahrain as it was believed that in order to get the best quality of freshwater Bahrain had a very significant role as a god of wisdom. The Sumerians had a very complex view of the world where sweet water rises up from depth to meet the salt water - had religious significance to the people of Mesopotamia. Enki, the god of sweet water (Figure 2) in the "Epic of Gilgamesh" had a very significant role as a god of wisdom. The Sumerians believed that at the beginning of the world gods dwelled mainly in Dimun and blessed it with sweet water, vegetation, health and eternal youth. It was here – probably around Bahrain where the water of the sweet sea-beneath-the-world "absu" broke through to the surface (Jenner 1984).

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The dramatic rise in population of the islands, linked with larger indigenous families and influx of migrant labour, has meant that concerns over the quantity of water left in the aquifers have begun to emerge. It is likely that these springs were linked to the presence of the rich oyster beds around Bahrain. These springs are an important part Bahrain’s rich heritage and represent a non-renewable heritage resource. If the presence of the submarine springs can be associated with the pearl trade, they are of historical and cultural importance. This is why conservation efforts should be made to preserve these springs for their historical significance.

Groundwater depletion

Bahrain’s groundwater is a resource which is unlikely to be renewed to any significant extent in the near future. The water in these aquifers, which originally fell as rainfall in Saudi Arabia, has not been replenished since pluvial periods occurring in the late Pleistocene (c. 13.5 ka BP) and early Holocene (9 – 6 ka BP). The dramatic rise in population of the islands, linked with larger indigenous families and influx of migrant labour, has meant that concerns over the quantity of water left in the aquifers have begun to emerge. It is likely that these springs were linked to the presence of the rich oyster beds around Bahrain. These springs are an important part Bahrain’s rich heritage and represent a non-renewable heritage resource. If the presence of the submarine springs can be associated with the pearl trade, they are of historical and cultural importance. This is why conservation efforts should be made to preserve these springs for their historical significance.

Submarine freshwater springs were important sources of water for fishermen (one could dive and fill a goat-skin sack with sweet water while out at sea), as well as providing water for villages via water pipes (Hansen 1968). In the early 16th century the Arab traveler Ahmad ibn Majid wrote: “a man can dive into the salt sea with a shink and can fill it with fresh water while he is submerged in salt water” (Casey & Vine 1993). Today many of the submarine fresh-water springs have gone – backfilled during extensive ‘reclamation’ work or overexploited and now discharging brackish water. This destruction represents the loss of a non-renewable heritage resource.

Mythology of the springs

Mesopotamian texts from the third millennium onwards describe Ancient Dimun, to which Bahrain is believed to belong, as ‘a pure and holy place, a paradise of sweet running water and lush vegetation’ (e.g. Crawford 1998). The Sumerian creation myths describe Dimun, as an idyllic place with artistic springs conducive to longevity of life (Potts 1983). The submarine springs in Bahrain – where sweet water rises up from depth to meet the salt water – had religious significance to the people of Mesopotamia. Enki, the god of sweet water (Figure 2) in the ‘Epic of Gilgamesh’ had a very significant role as a god of wisdom. The Sumerians believed that at the beginning of the world gods dwelled mainly in Dimun and blessed it with sweet water, vegetation, health and eternal youth. It was here – probably around Bahrain where the water of the sweet sea-beneath-the-world "absu" broke through to the surface (Jenner 1984).

This picture continues in the Arabian cosmology (Potts 1983: 12). One of the Arabian legend says that the sweet water from Bahrain springs comes from the extension of Euphrates river which continues under the sea (Jenner 1984:10).

Submarine freshwater springs of Bahrain, so important to the pearl industry of Bahrain, are a non-renewable heritage resource. If the presence of the submarine springs can be associated with the pearl trade, they are of historical and cultural importance. This is why conservation efforts should be made to preserve these springs for their historical significance.

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