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Concept article: Mini-Review

The Multifaceted Role of *Argania spinosa* in Ecosystem Protection, Biodiversity Preservation and Human Health.

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Abstract

Argania spinosa, commonly known as Argan tree, native to arid regions of Morocco, has been recognized for its remarkable ability to thrive in harsh conditions, playing a crucial role in soil conservation and prevention of desertification. Its deep root system helps stabilise soil, preventing erosion and promoting sustainable land use. This characteristic makes of the *Argania spinosa* tree an invaluable tool in the protection of ecosystems against the adverse impacts of climate change. Furthermore, the Argan tree fosters biodiversity by providing a unique habitat for a diverse range of flora and fauna. The endemic species associated with *Argania spinosa* contribute to the overall richness and resilience of the ecosystems in which it is found. Argan oil, derived from the nuts part of the tree, has gained international recognition for its health-promoting properties. Rich in antioxidants, essential fatty acids, and various bioactive compound linking Argan oil to numerous health benefits. Its consumption has been associated with cardiovascular health, anti-inflammatory effects, and potential anticancer properties. In conclusion, understanding and harnessing the potential of this unique tree can contribute to holistic approaches for addressing environmental challenges never mind promoting the health and prosperity of both ecosystems and communities.

Keywords: *Argania spinosa*, desertification, ecosystem, biodiversity, Argan oil, health.

Introduction

In the arid landscapes of southwestern Maghreb (figure 1), the *Argania spinosa*, commonly known as the Argan tree, emerges as a beacon of sustainable coexistence between nature and humanity. This unique tree, native to a challenging environment, has garnered attention for its multifaceted contributions to environmental resilience, biodiversity conservation, and human health (Sebaa and Kaid Harche, 2014; Ekpong, 2008; Mechqoq *et al.,* 2021). The protection of ecosystems is a paramount concern in the face of climate change and habitat destruction. *Argania spinosa*, with its remarkable ability to flourish in arid conditions, plays a pivotal role in soil conservation and the prevention of desertification (figure 2) (Aithammou *et al.,* 2019; Lopez-Saez and Alba Sanchez, 2009). Understanding how the Argan tree actively contributes to ecosystem protection unveils its potential as a tool for mitigating environmental challenges and fostering resilient landscapes. Argan tree's existence creates a unique habitat supporting a diverse array of flora and fauna (Chakhchar *et al.,* 2020; Bhar *et al.,* 2022). Exploring the role of *Argania spinosa* in biodiversity preservation provides insights into the interconnected relationships within ecosystems, emphasizing the importance of safeguarding these environments. Moreover, the significance of *Argania spinosa* extends beyond its ecological impact to the realm of human health (Walter *et al.,* 2013; Seleiman *et al.,* 2021; Zunzunegui *et al.,* 2018). The extraction of Argan oil, derived from the tree's nuts, has become synonymous with nutritional and medicinal benefits (figure 3). Rich in antioxidants, essential fatty acids, and other bioactive compounds, Argan oil is associated with various health advantages, ranging from cardiovascular support to anti-inflammatory properties (Osakabe *et al.,* 2014; Chakhchar *et al.,* 2016; Díaz-Barradas *et al.,* 2010). This paper delves into the diverse and interconnected roles played by *Argania spinosa*, underscoring its potential as a natural powerhouse for a sustainable future.

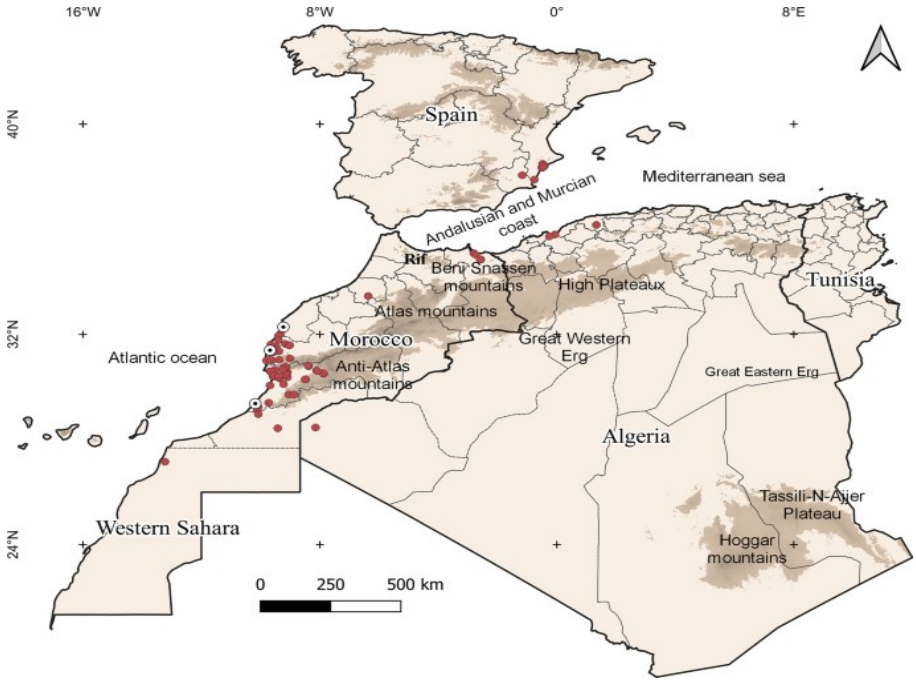

Figure 1. Distribution and geographic habitat of *Argania spinosa* in the southwestern regions of the Maghreb (Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia) (Louati *et al.,* 2019, Kouidri *et al.,* 2014).

Figure 2. Role of *Argania spinosa* in soil conservation and the prevention of desertification (Louati *et al.,* 2019; Aabd and El Ayadi, 2011).

Figure 3. Extraction of Argan oil with nutritional and medicinal benefits (Louati *et al.,* 2019; Kouidri *et al.,* 2014)

1. Ecosystem protection

Argania spinosa stands as a silent guardian against the encroachment of desertification and the erosive forces threatening fragile ecosystems. With a root system that delves deep into the arid soil, the Argan tree acts as a natural anchor, stabilizing terrain and preventing soil erosion. As climate change intensifies, understanding the Argan tree's role in ecosystem protection becomes paramount. Its ability to withstand and mitigate environmental stressors positions *Argania spinosa* as a valuable ally in the global effort to combat land degradation. Here's a closer look at how *Argania spinosa* is intertwined with the protection of ecosystems (Louati *et al.,* 2019; Alifriqui, 2004; Alados and El Aich, 2008; Meslem et al. 2015; Benlahbil *et al.,* 2015).

1.1. Soil Conservation: Argan trees have a deep and extensive root system that helps bind the soil, preventing erosion. This is particularly vital in arid and semi-arid regions where soil degradation is a persistent challenge. The roots of *Argania spinosa* play a pivotal role in stabilizing the soil, reducing the risk of landslides and promoting sustainable land use practices.

1.2. Drought Resistance: Argan trees have adapted to thrive in harsh conditions, including periods of drought. Their ability to withstand water scarcity is essential for maintaining ecological balance in arid ecosystems. As climate change leads to more frequent and intense droughts, the presence of *Argania spinosa* becomes increasingly valuable for preserving the integrity of these ecosystems.

1.3. **Prevention of Desertification:** The expansive root system of the Argan tree not only prevents soil erosion but also helps combat desertification—the process by which fertile land transforms into desert. As the Argan tree anchors the soil and provides shade, it creates a microclimate that facilitates the survival of other plant species, contributing to the overall resistance against desertification.

1.4. **Biodiversity Support:** The Argan tree fosters biodiversity by providing a unique habitat for a variety of plant and animal species. The diverse ecosystem surrounding *Argania spinosa* includes plants that are adapted to the tree's shade and animals that find shelter and sustenance in its branches. This biodiversity is crucial for the resilience of the entire ecosystem, creating a balanced and sustainable environment.

1.5. **Carbon Sequestration:** Argan trees contribute to carbon sequestration, helping mitigate the impacts of climate change. The process of photosynthesis in the leaves of the tree absorbs carbon dioxide from the atmosphere and converts it into oxygen. As concerns about rising greenhouse gas levels grow, the role of *Argania spinosa* in sequestering carbon becomes increasingly significant.

1.6. **Socioeconomic Impact:** The protection of ecosystems by *Argania spinosa* extends beyond environmental considerations. The Argan tree has cultural and socioeconomic significance for local communities. The sustainable use of the tree's resources, such as Argan oil production, provides economic opportunities for communities, linking conservation efforts with human well-being.

2. Biodiversity Preservation

The Argan tree creates a haven for biodiversity, fostering a unique ecosystem that supports a diverse range of plant and animal species. The interplay between the Argan tree and its surroundings emphasizes the delicate balance required for sustaining life. Studying these relationships reveals how *Argania spinosa* contributes not only to its own survival but also to the overall richness and resilience of the ecosystems it inhabits. Preserving these ecosystems emerges as a necessity for safeguarding the planet's biological diversity. Here's an exploration of how *Argania spinosa* is linked to the preservation of biodiversity (El Adib *et al.,* 2015; Louati *et al.,* 2019; Msanda *et al.,* 2005; Morton and Voss,1987; Khallouki *et al.,* 2017).

2.1. **Habitat Creation:** Argan trees create a unique habitat in their immediate vicinity. The shade provided by their canopies and the microclimate they generate underneath support the growth of various plant species. This, in turn, attracts a diverse array of insects, birds, and mammals. The

branches and leaves of the Argan tree become nesting sites and shelters, fostering biodiversity within its ecosystem.

2.2. Flora Diversity: The Argan tree is not an isolated entity but part of a broader ecosystem. The plant diversity surrounding *Argania spinosa* is influenced by its presence, creating a balanced and varied plant community. This diversity of flora contributes to the overall resilience of the ecosystem, allowing it to adapt to changing environmental conditions.

2.3. Fauna Diversity: The Argan tree provides a haven for various animal species. Birds, insects, and small mammals find refuge in the branches, while larger animals may seek shade beneath its canopy. The presence of *Argania spinosa* contributes to the overall richness of the ecosystem by supporting a diverse range of wildlife, including both resident and migratory species.

2.4. Mutualistic Relationships: Argan trees engage in mutualistic relationships with certain animals. For example, goats are known to climb the Argan trees to feed on the fruits (figure 4). While this may seem detrimental to the tree, it helps in seed dispersal. The seeds pass through the digestive system of the goats and are then excreted in different locations, aiding in the natural regeneration of Argan forests.

Figure 4. Goats climbing the Argan trees to feed on the fruits (Ouhaddou *et al.,* 2014).

2.5. Endemism and Adaptation: The Argan tree itself is an endemic species, meaning it is native to a specific geographic area. The unique conditions in which *Argania spinosa* thrives create a specialized ecosystem with species adapted to its presence. This endemism enhances the biodiversity of the region, making the Argan forest a distinctive and valuable ecological asset.

2.6. Conservation of rare species: The Argan forest may serve as a refuge for plant and animal species that are adapted to arid environments and may be rare or endangered. By maintaining the health of the Argan ecosystem, efforts are indirectly contributing to the conservation of these species and preventing their decline.

3. Human Health

Beyond its ecological contributions, the Argan tree extends its benevolence to human health through the extraction of Argan oil from its nuts. Argan oil has garnered global acclaim for its nutritional richness, boasting antioxidants, essential fatty acids, and other bioactive compounds. Scientific studies link Argan oil consumption to various health benefits, including cardiovascular support and anti-inflammatory properties. The traditional uses of Argan oil in local communities add a cultural dimension, showcasing the integration of ancient wisdom with modern health practices. Here's an exploration of how *Argania spinosa* is linked to human health (Charrouf and Guillaume, 2008; El Abbassi *et al.,* 2014; Dunn *et al.,* 1997; Hanana *et al.,* 2018; Berkaoui *et al.,* 2017).

3.1. Nutrient-rich Argan Oil: The primary product derived from *Argania spinosa* is Argan oil, a culinary and cosmetic treasure. This oil is rich in essential nutrients, including vitamin E, essential fatty acids (such as oleic and linoleic acids), antioxidants, and polyphenols. These compounds contribute to the nutritional value of Argan oil and have been associated with various health benefits.

3.2. Cardiovascular Health: The monounsaturated and polyunsaturated fatty acids in Argan oil, particularly oleic acid and linoleic acid, are known to have positive effects on cardiovascular health. These fats may help reduce bad cholesterol levels, lower blood pressure, and decrease the risk of cardiovascular diseases.

3.3. Anti-Inflammatory Properties: The presence of antioxidants, such as tocopherols and polyphenols, in Argan oil confers anti-inflammatory properties. Chronic inflammation is implicated in various health conditions, including cardiovascular diseases and certain types of cancers. Regular consumption of Argan oil may contribute to mitigating inflammation in the body.

3.4. Antioxidant Defense: Argan oil's high antioxidant content helps neutralize free radicals in the body. Free radicals can cause oxidative stress, which is associated with aging and various chronic diseases. The antioxidants in Argan oil help protect cells from oxidative damage, promoting overall health and well-being.

3.5. Skin and Hair Health: Beyond internal health benefits, Argan oil is widely used for skincare and haircare. When applied topically, it moisturizes the skin, helps reduce signs of aging, and supports hair health. The vitamin E in Argan oil contributes to its skin-repairing properties.

Conclusion

Argania spinosa, known as Argan tree, with its remarkable ability to thrive in arid conditions, acts as a natural guardian, contributing to soil conservation and preventing desertification. Its deep-rooted presence fosters biodiversity, creating a unique habitat that supports a diverse array of flora and fauna, thereby contributing to the overall resilience of ecosystems. Furthermore, the extraction of Argan oil from the nuts of *Argania spinosa* has positioned this tree as a valuable asset for human health. Rich in antioxidants, essential fatty acids, and other bioactive compounds, Argan oil has been associated with various health benefits, ranging from cardiovascular support to anti-inflammatory effects. The protection of ecosystems not only safeguards the Argan tree but also ensures the health and prosperity of the surrounding environment. Simultaneously, the sustainable use of *Argania spinosa*'s resources, such as Argan oil production, contributes to the livelihoods of local communities.

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