

Mainstreaming Nature Conservation in the Palestinian Territories

Jerusalem Office



Environmental protection is often neglected in the Palestinian territories. The establishment of scientific, research-based public information on ecological issues and increasing ecotourism in the nature reserves could start to change minds and help to raise environmental awareness.

CHALLENGES

Aside from the challenge of an ongoing political conflict, climate change implications are affecting the Palestinian territories more and more. Fires, floods, and scarce water resources demand drastic changes in age-old agricultural traditions. Moreover, the environment and biodiversity suffer from major threats identified globally as habitat destruction, overexploitation, invasive species, and pollution. Dealing with all these obstacles is not easy, especially in areas of conflict, and requires creative, local solutions. There is great need in the Palestinian territories to protect its biodiversity and nature in order to maintain the local ecological balance.



Community events in the nature reserves

Along with nature conservation, it is necessary to initiate small-scale structural changes through environmental education. Students in Palestine have little or no previous experience with their natural environment. Formal learning offers numerous lectures and activities at schools that mostly cover recycling, re-use and agricultural topics.

However, there are very few opportunities for students to experience outdoor learning, or learning about the natural environment surrounding them such as nature reserves, birds, plants and animals. The Hanns Seidel Foundation (HSF) is partnering with various organizations and official Palestinian bureaus to shed light on the importance of nature conservation, and on the need for a professional database and implementation of educational projects.

APPROACHES

Following this approach, HSF is working both on a social and an economic level promoting ecotourism and emphasizing the benefits of nature conservation. For example, capacity-building courses for tour guides have been launched. Through these courses, skills and knowledge regarding environment, ecotourism, and conservation of both cultural and natural Palestinian heritage are increased. In another project, a campaign was held in order to demon-

The project of breeding the barn owls helps us a lot in environmental farming. The installation of nesting boxes promoted their presence in the area and therefore limited the number of rodents on the farms.

Khaled Mukarker, farmer from the village of Auja in the Jordan Valley



Conservation of cultural heritage and sites



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strate to farmers in the Jordan Valley the possibility of biological rodent control by using barn owls. By doing so, management and monitoring of artificial nesting boxes for the barn owls were taught. Addressing the social level, community events were held in nature reserves to develop a sense of belonging and responsibility towards nature and the sites. With this idea, a project for children in Bethlehem was launched, focusing on building a relationship with a wild bird, the swift. Nesting boxes were installed on a wall of the Terra Sancta School. Through this, we encouraged its students to learn about migratory birds and the natural balance, as well as protecting the swifts' population.

One of the key elements of our work is the development of the website "Mahmiyat.ps". The site aims to raise awareness about nature reserves by sharing information about tracks and nearby historical and cultural sites. It provides user-friendly databases of Palestinian flora and fauna which makes the website a significant online educational tool serving various sectors of society. It is frequented by about 90,000 visitors per year. All these projects were successfully implemented in past years in cooperation with the Environment Quality Authority (EQA), the Palestine Society for Environment and Sustainable Development and the Arab Tourist Guide Union.

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IMPACT

Working for several years on environmental awareness, ecology, and economy, we observe growing interest in these issues. Through educational programs and community events, we have reached thousands of people, and improved their opportunities to explore the trails, wildlife, and beautiful local nature. In addition, more schools request having schoolyard activities to learn about the natural environment. Furthermore, through working with local tour guides who pass on the knowledge we share, we plant seeds for many future visitors to these sites. Our work with farmers and the placement and monitoring of nesting boxes has a double effect. It helps the birds' population to flourish, and it succeeds in fighting rodents using biological measures. We work bottom-up, as well as top-down, as it is crucial for achieving long-term results.

We also work together with local governmental bodies to encourage action for sustainable development in municipal politics by contributing to the local economic development of villages. For example, in the village of Ajja, we assisted in creating the first eco-village designed in Palestine that includes hiking, camping in organic farms, three solar stations and natural and cultural heritage sites. Developing this concept and promoting Ajja as an eco-destination encouraged other municipalities to embrace environmental and sustainable development concepts and solutions. ■

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