

Keeping the Dead Sea Alive: Toward a Regional Environmental Management Plan



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Julie Meunier

[Photo: Wild deer are among the region's tourist attractions.]

The Dead Sea is still alive but ailing, although it's not as terminally ill as some scientists have suggested.

According to [Friends of the Earth-Middle East](#) (FoEME), the Dead Sea will remain viable — but only if a suitable environmental management plan can be mounted quickly for the region.

Dropping water levels

Since the 1950's and '60's, researchers have noted a drop of some 25 metres in Dead Sea water levels. This decline is due primarily to the upstream diversion of the Jordan and Yarmouk Rivers by Israel and Jordan. Today, only 10% of the Jordan River's waters reach the Dead Sea. Moreover, evaporation ponds used to produce industrial potash at the extreme southern end of the basin are also drying up the Sea. Meanwhile, much of the unique ecology of region is being affected by ill-designed and poorly located facilities built on both the western and eastern shores to accommodate large annual increases in tourism. These factors are of particular interest to FoEME members in their efforts to protect the Dead Sea — a challenge of international scope.

With funding from the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), FoEME has been conducting research to assess the environmental issues facing the Dead Sea. "There is no management plan for preserving the Dead Sea's environment," says [Gidon Bromberg](#), co-director of FoEME. "There are certainly plans for tourism development, but these are not integrated with the industrial, farming, and environmental aspects."

Tourism

"What we need is a general understanding among the Jordanians, Israelis, and Palestinians to come up with a sustainable environmental plan. As I see it, tourism will be the saviour of the Dead Sea. After all, if there is no sea, there will be no reason for tourism. What's more, tourism revenues are far more important than those from agriculture or industry," states Bromberg.

He notes that tourism development is already flourishing in light of the Israel-Palestine peace process that began in the early 1990's. "Since the peace process began, there have been some 50,000 proposals for tourism projects [such as new hotels]," says Bromberg. But "this is far too much for the Sea's carrying capacity. And worse, such development, as currently planned in a linear fashion all along the coast, would be a catastrophe for the region's ecosystem."

Resort areas

"It would be better to group hotels together in designated resort areas and try to introduce a sound environmental concept," Bromberg argues. In this way, some of the region's flora and fauna, such as the leopard and the lynx, could be saved from extinction.

The Dead Sea's tourism potential is severely limited by the presence of the potash industry, which pollutes the water and causes fluctuations in its level. FoEME and its partners are therefore working with the governments of Jordan and Israel to determine the best location for new tourism ventures. In May 1998, with IDRC's support, FoEME brought together Jordanians, Palestinians, and Israelis for the first time for a symposium on the Dead Sea. "Thanks to these workshops," says Bromberg, "we were able to put together some rational proposals for tourism development."

UNESCO recognition

FoEME's ultimate goal is to get the Dead Sea recognized as a 'World Heritage Site' by the [United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization](#) (UNESCO). Work is currently underway on a broad proposal that the Israeli and Jordanian governments would jointly submit to UNESCO. With official recognition of this kind in place, Bromberg believes that "the Dead Sea's survival would be guaranteed in a way that it is not today."

"There is still much to be done to sensitize the public, both internationally and within the region," stresses Bromberg. "The Dead Sea has to be protected from industrial pollution and chaotic tourism development, which would further degrade the environment and threaten the very existence of this life-giving body of water," he concludes.

Julie Meunier is a journalist for the Montréal-based publication, Réseau Liberté. (Photo: J. Meunier)

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