Green causes are high on Israel’s agenda. Nathan Jeffay highlights their achievements

Over the past two decades there has been a massive growth in green activism in Israel, with dozens of new organisations and initiatives arguing for greater protection of the country’s unique environment.

“Environmentalism can be considered among the country’s most effective social movements,” says an authoritative Ben Gurion University report on Israel’s green scene. It gives credit to the “hundreds of successful campaigns that have left natural areas intact, reduced pollution emissions and transformed government policies to become more pro-environmental”.

Today, Jerusalem takes a strong line on environmental protection. In March, the new Environment Minister Amir Peretz declared the country to be “in the midst of a courageous environmental revolution”.

The Ben Gurion University report observed that the growth in environmental organisations since the 1990s has created “a diverse national network which is actively involved in seeking environmental protection, nature preservation and sustainable development”. It says that the lively environmentalism is due to effective campaigns, strong education, and “talented and conscientious activists”.

Much of Israeli environmental activism is replicated across the world—fights for better public transport, for green taxes, for careful planning when it comes to construction. But some campaigns are distinctively Middle Eastern.

A British-born environmental activist plays a key role in one of the most renowned environmental programmes in the region, the Good Water Neighbours project of Friends of the Earth Middle East. Amy Lipman-Avizohar directs its education operation in Israel.

The Good Water Neighbours focuses on the scarcity of water in and around Israel, advocates water-conserving policies and cooperation on water between Israel and its neighbours. It gets communities across borders co-operating on water and educates children about responsible water usage.

The programme has received numerous honours, including Time Magazine’s Heroes of the Environment award and has been asked to advise Tony Blair on water-related issues in the Middle East. Its work has been presented at meetings and seminars held in the European Parliament, the US Congress, aid agency gatherings and before the United Nations.

Friends of the Earth Middle East has an Israeli, Palestinian and Jordanian office and its Good Water Neighbours brings together all three of them.

It operates in 25 communities, all partnered in their efforts to promote environmental awareness, local solutions and peace building.

“Water has no borders,” says Ms Lipman-Avizohar. “At the end of the day we are all on the same unique environment. The project is all about raising awareness of nature and of the people around us that depend on the region’s water.”

The Israeli environmental movement has a disproportionately high representation of Western immigrants. Ms Lipman-Avizohar was born and spent part of her youth in Leeds, before making aliyah with her Leeds-born parents.

Her responsibilities include running educational sessions in schools, developing resource kits for guides who are involved in the programme and organising youth camps that bring Israeli, Palestinian and Jordanian youngsters together.

“We’re trying to build in children the values of being careful with water and sharing it with their neighbours,” she says.

Environmental matters fascinated Ms Lipman-Avizohar, 35, from a young age. “As a child, from seventh grade, I was in the nature scouts and as a soldier I was a teacher-guide in the education corps, taking other soldiers to natural sites and giving them an appreciation of what they saw, a role I really enjoyed.”

She finds that Israel is a good place to be in environmental activism, because while there are plenty of problems, the general atmosphere is supportive of efforts for change.

“There are a lot of challenges, but if there is one thing we can be proud of it’s that environmental education is very strong and awareness of the younger generation of the environment is very good—it’s a very important part of studies in the country.”

The good campaigners

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