Let the Jordan River flow!

A regional approach to the rehabilitation of the lower Jordan river

by Elizabeth Ya’ari
As one of only a few transboundary organisations working on environmental peacemaking today, EcoPeace/Friends of the Earth Middle East (FoEME)’s approach and experience in water resource management in conflict and post-conflict situations can serve as a model for both top-down and bottom-up efforts. One of FoEME’s central areas of activity, the rehabilitation of the Lower Jordan River, illustrates key strategies by which water projects can facilitate transboundary cooperation.

The Lower Jordan River has flowed freely for thousands of years from the Sea of Galilee to the Dead Sea. Sadly, the “mighty Jordan” has been devastated by over-exploitation, pollution and a lack of regional management. Today the river’s flow has been reduced to a trickle due to the damming and diversion of 98% of the river’s flow to meet domestic and agricultural purposes in Israel, Syria and Jordan. This “big grab” approach to water management has effectively destroyed the Lower Jordan River, reduced biodiversity along its banks by over 50 percent, and transformed the culturally and historically important river into little more than an open channel of agricultural runoff, diverted saline waters, and wastewater, which has further resulted in the devastation of its terminal lake, the Dead Sea.

The experience of FoEME shows that it is possible to start a process of reversing 60 years of the Jordan River’s demise even in the midst of violent conflict, animosity towards the other and reduced precipitation due to climate change. FoEME’s work combines regional research, high level advocacy and stakeholder participation.

New research released over the past two years by FoEME

- has identified a regional rehabilitation goal to return approximately a third of the historical flows of the Lower Jordan to achieve fair to high ecosystem integrity and health;

- identified economically friendly trade-offs and opportunities to save and produce water at less than the marginal cost of water in Jordan, Palestine and Israel part of which could be used to rehabilitate the Lower Jordan River;

- conducted a comparative analysis of a desalinization driven water economy with that of a water conservation driven economy – proving that the economic benefits of conservation include the creation of thousands of jobs.

Each of the regional studies is undertaken tri-laterally with Palestinian, Israeli and Jordanian experts working together. To get inputs and feedback from stakeholders FoEME hosts regular meetings of its National and Regional Jordan River Forums to bring together academics and decision makers as well as separate meetings of its recently launched Jordan River Council involving representatives of a wide spectrum of other stakeholders including business and faith based representatives.

This year FoEME is launching a new project together with partners at the Stockholm International Water Institute and Global Nature Fund to create the first ever regional master plan for the Lower Jordan River. The FoEME Master Plan, to be conducted by a leading planning firm, will provide regional decision makers with both a vision for the rehabilitated Lower Jordan River as well as operational starting points to advance its implementation and make the rehabilitated Lower Jordan a reality.

Further Information
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