

Saving a tourist haven

By Jonathan Pearlman

Oct 24, 2011

TEL AVIV: For thousands of years, people have flocked to the Dead Sea - the lowest place on earth, and among the saltiest - for its healing powers, mineral-filled mud and buoyant water.

But the sea, which borders Jordan and Israel, has dropped dramatically, about 30m in the past 50 years, and its surface area has shrunk by a third. At this rate, it could disappear by 2050.

The bitterly salty lake, which now sits 423m below sea level, has long been a haven for tourists. More than 1.7 million visit each year, either for the bizarre experience of floating on its waters - nine times saltier than any sea - or to seek treatment for conditions such as psoriasis and arthritis. But the sea is also home to a lucrative minerals industry, which has exacerbated its disappearance.

To try to save the sea, scientists have proposed a radical project to transfer water with a 180km pipeline connecting the Red Sea to the Dead Sea.

The project has been backed by Jordanian, Palestinian and Israeli officials, who believe it could assist with their water problems, as well as foster cooperation and preserve tourism and the industry reliant on the sea.

In the coming weeks, the World Bank is expected to back a pilot project, which would involve transferring water to a small, closed section of the sea in Jordan. This would enable testing of the impact of mixing the two types of sea water.

But the proposed US\$17 billion (S\$22 billion) project, which would take about 25 years to complete, has not been free from controversy.

The Israeli director of Friends of the Earth Middle East, Mr Gidon Bromberg, said the project could cause irreversible environmental damage.

He said mixing waters from the two seas would cause deposits of gypsum, which could potentially dilute and change the colour of the water.

'We are very worried about the way the World Bank study is going forward,' he said. 'The project has been less than transparent. It actually poses a great risk to the Dead Sea. If the sea turns milky white, it could increase temperatures, produce toxic gases and damage the nature reserves and oases around the sea.'

The project will also depend on the cooperation of Jordan, Israel, Syria and the Palestinians, who will have to overcome their sometimes testy relations - and their desperate need for water - to agree on construction projects and water flows.

The disappearance of the sea has been blamed mainly on the diversion of water for drinking and irrigation from the Jordan River.

The river once fed the sea with about 1.3 billion cubic m of fresh water per year, but now provides less than 100 million cubic m. Israel, Jordan, Syria and the Palestinians have all diverted water from the river. Meanwhile, Israeli and Jordanian companies have exacerbated the sea's shrinkage by evaporating the mineral-rich water to extract potash, bromides and magnesium.

Under the proposed pipeline project, about 2 billion cubic m of water could be transferred to the Dead Sea each year, with half being converted to drinking water and half transferred to the sea. The drop in elevation of more than 400m between the two seas would generate electricity to run a desalination plant.

Despite its apparently grim future, the Dead Sea did recently show a strange sign of life. A team of scientists recently discovered that - though the sea cannot sustain marine life - a form of bacteria has been somehow thriving in craters on the sea floor.