

The Red-Dead Sea Canal study: genuine or for show?

Staff from the World Bank presented their feasibility study for the Red-Dead Sea Canal project to the public. Experts and environmentalists claimed in response that the scientific foundation of the examination is poor, the timeframe for the study is too short, and fundamental questions will not be examined. Above all, though, they are angry that just a single option will be examined – a canal from the Red Sea to the Dead Sea.

Yael Ivri-Darel, Ynet, July 31, 2008

What is the central goal of the Red-Dead Sea Canal project? Is it an initiative to stabilize the rapidly-declining level of the Dead Sea, or does it aim to promote the ecological rehabilitation of this unique lake? Or perhaps the purpose is to provide water for Israel, Jordan, and the Palestinian Authority?

These substantive questions, and many others, went unanswered yesterday (Wednesday) at a public hearing on the subject. Meanwhile the Red-Dead Sea Canal project is moving ahead steadily, and the World Bank has begun to prepare a feasibility study for the project. State President Shimon Peres supports the initiative; the Minister for the Development of the Negev and the Galilee, Yaacov Edri, is working hard to move it forward; and several wealthy individuals are also interested in the opportunities it creates.

According to the emerging plan, the Red-Dead Sea Canal will carry some two million cubic meters of water a year from the Gulf of Eilat to the Dead Sea. How will the water from the Gulf of Eilat influence the Dead Sea? Will the project influence the pattern of currents and habitats in the Gulf of Eilat? How will the conduit channels influence the ecological environment in this desert region? Once again, there is not yet even a shadow of an answer to these questions.

A series of experts appeared at the meeting and presented numerous questions to the World Bank. They did not hide their serious criticism of the proposal. The issue of the Dead Sea is famous for the disagreements it has fueled, but for once there seemed to be consensus: "The scientific examination of this project is problematic, and the time and financial resources allocated are inadequate," stated Yehoshua Shakedi, the Chief Scientist in the Nature and Parks Authority, echoing the position of many at the gathering.

"You cannot solve one ecological problem by creating another one. We are not going to sacrifice the Arava for the sake of the Dead Sea," Shakedi declared. He noted his concern about the scientific examination for this mega-project. In particular, he feels that the timeframe for the examination – twelve months – does not reflect an intention to undertake serious research.

It is worth noting that Shakedi's comment was unusual. Despite the importance of this subject, the Nature and Parks Authority – which is an arm of the government – has refrained from stating its position on the issue.