Israel and Jordan will work together to rehabilitate the polluted Jordan River
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The southern Jordan River has been neglected for years transforming into an open canal of sewage and brackish waters. A new Israeli-Jordanian initiative will hopefully save it. The Ministry of Regional Cooperation and the Ministry of Environmental Protection are promoting a project to rehabilitate the river to create employment and tourist attractions for neighbors on both sides of the river.

The southern section of the Jordan River, stretching from Degania Dam to the Dead Sea, is considered one of the most contaminated water sources in Israel. Natural water resources which once nourished the channel have been diverted and replaced with a stream of urban and agricultural wastes saturated with chemical substance and trash.

A new rehabilitation plan, revealed here for the first time, might be the lifeline needed for the entire region. It has become known to Ynet, that this new plan/initiative, product of a joint Israeli-Jordanian cooperation, has been promoted by the Ministry of Regional Cooperation and the Ministry of Environmental Protection. In the past few weeks there have been advanced contacts between Israeli and Jordanian professional representatives.

The River, within this initiative is planed to go through an environmental, ecological and touristic overall rehabilitation. The program will focus on two sections of the River. The first Northern section stretching from Degania Dam to Naharaim, will include mainly Israeli construction of wastewater treatment plants. Whilst, the second section of the river, stretching from Naharaim to Nahal Stream, will be carried out in cooperation with the Jordanian Kingdom.

A preliminary plan for the rehabilitation of river and its surroundings will be prepared for the communal section. After the conclusion of the first stage, both parties will prepare a specific plan of action to his territory, and will promote it independently whilst cooperating in the common areas. The consolidation of the Israeli preliminary plans are expected to last 1 year and require over one million NIS that will be invested by the Ministry of Regional Cooperation.

An “Open Sewer Canal”

Many specialists nickname the southern section of the Jordan River stretching between the Sea of Galilee and Dead Sea as an “Open Sewer Canal”. In this neglected channel urban and industrial sewage flows from the surrounding communities (Tiberias, Beit Shean and settlements of the Jordan Valley) together with brackish waters and fish pond effluent from the area. The water’s green color and stench testifies to its critical state more than any description or picture.

Further aggravating the situation is the fact that for years the flow of fresh water to the channel has ceased. The establishment of the Israeli national water system in 1964 diverted large amounts of the Jordan River's waters and dozens of barriers where set up along the channel, on both sides, preventing the flood waters from arriving to its stream. The result today - only 8% from the natural water flow travels down the narrow polluted and neglected channel that desperately requires an urgent rehabilitation.

The Israeli contribution to the rehabilitation of the river includes mainly the establishment of wastewater treatment plants for the Jordan Valley settlements, yet the projects were delayed and their contribution is inappreciable. For instance, the wastewater treatment plant for the Beit Shean region was only recently inaugurated, yet its full capacity work will begin in a few months only. The construction of the Bitanya wastewater treatment plant, the area’s central institute, began only recently and is building is expected to end in two years time.
According to professional sources in the Ministry of Environmental Protection, between 2 to 3 million cubic meters of sewage flow to the Jordan each and every year. Mr. Alon Zask, Director of Water & Streams Division in the Ministry of Environmental Protection, explained that the developing rehabilitation program includes the cleansing of waters from pollutants, the re-initiation flow of fresh water to nature and the restoration of historical sites along the river. “If things will proceed as planned and the cooperation will succeed, we’re talking about an immense plan. This is the first most comprehensive attempt to build a communal working program that is likely to benefit the whole area” he said to Ynet.

**Environmental-occupational revolution**

The Ministry of Regional Cooperation and the Ministry of Environmental Protection mentioned this plan as the most important initiation to the river since the last years. The need for a cross-boundary cooperation gathered to the initiative a great number of additional partners, such as the Ministry for the Development of the Negev and the Galilee, the Water Authorities and the Friends of the Earth Middle East Organization – Israel, that operates a Jordanian branch as well. First meetings of the steering committee have already taken place.

Lately, the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Regional Cooperation Silvan Shalom, raised the subject to a number of foreign governments which are interested to take part in advancement of the project. Including the government of Australia, though its extent of involvement isn’t yet determined.

Minister Shalom, currently abroad, revealed to Ynet that “this is an important subject that hasn’t been resolved over the years and today we’re looking to advance a solution. The rehabilitation of the Jordan River is an environmental-occupational revolution in the southern area that will lead to the development of the local and regional economy. Cooperation to rehabilitate the river is necessary because of it’s economic, historical and social significance”.

The Minister of Environmental Protection, Gilad Erdan also added “we have to urgently achieve the rehabilitation of the Jordan river to enable the wide public to return and to benefit from this unique natural and historical resource. Over the years sewage has flowed in the Jordan River causing an ecological destruction and a severe environmental hazard. I’m leading my office to adopt all means in order to cease the pollution of the river and to enable its rehabilitation. My intention is to invest also many budgets together with the Ministry for the Development of the Negev and the Galilee, in order to upgrade the river and to return it to its splendor”.
