Friends of the Earth Middle East (FoEME) is a unique organization at the forefront of the environmental peacemaking movement. As a trilateral organization that brings together Jordanian, Palestinian, and Israeli environmentalists, our primary objective is the promotion of cooperative efforts to protect our shared environmental heritage. In so doing, we seek to advance both sustainable regional development and the creation of necessary conditions for lasting peace in our region. FoEME has offices in Amman, Bethlehem, and Tel-Aviv. FoEME is a member of Friends of the Earth International, the largest grassroots environmental organization in the world.

Since FoEME’s establishment in 1994, one of our priority areas has been the rehabilitation of the lower Jordan River. The Jordan River which once carried an average of 1.3 billion m³ of fresh water to the Dead Sea annually has been reduced to just 70 – 100 million m³ per year due to the diversion of 95% of the River’s flow by Israel, Jordan and Syria. Diverting the fresh water flow of the Jordan River tributaries has devastated the Dead Sea and its environs and transformed the culturally and historically important Jordan River into little more than an open channel of agricultural run-off, diverted saline waters and untreated sewage.

Access to the River is extremely restricted as both Israeli and Jordanian authorities maintain a closed military zone for most of the length of the River. With access to the River restricted and thus outside of the public's awareness, the River continues to be polluted and local residents are denied the opportunity to develop this unique area for tourism initiatives.

FoEME’s research has identified two areas especially rich with historical, natural and cultural heritage. The first area is located at the northern section of the Lower Jordan Valley from the Al Bakoora/Peace Island site to the Three Bridges site. The second, at the baptism site at Kaser el Yehud and Bethany Beyond the Jordan in the south of the Valley near the Dead Sea. FoEME is currently exploring the possibility of transforming these areas, on both sides of the Jordan River, into Transboundary Protected Areas, more commonly known as Peace Parks.

A Transboundary Protected Area, as defined by the World Conservation Union (IUCN), is a protected area that spans across boundaries of multiple countries, where the political border that are enclosed within its area are abolished. This includes removal of all forms of physical boundaries, such as fences, allowing free movement of people and animals within the defined area. A boundary around the area may however be maintained to prevent unauthorized border crossing. Also known as Peace Parks, these transboundary protected areas are formally dedicated to the protection and management of biological diversity, of natural and associated cultural resources and to the promotion of peace and cooperation. The parks encourage regulated tourism, sustainable development and goodwill between neighboring countries.
Beginning in the North: The Jordan River Peace Park  
Al Bakoura / Peace Island - Three Bridges Site

FoEME believes that the areas of Al Bakoura-Peace Island and the Three Bridges sites has great potential to be developed into the Jordan River Peace Park, a “Transboundary Protected Area,” following the guidelines set forth by the IUCN. The area would encompass several areas including Al Bakoura, the Peace Island, the hydroelectric power station, and the three bridges site at Gesher / 'Jesir al-Majami'.

Al Bakoura - Peace Island is a small island formed where the Jordan and Yarmouk rivers meet. In 1927, Pinchas Rutenberg, a Russian immigrant and founder of the Palestine Electric Company (PEC), reached a unique agreement with HRH King Abdullah I of Jordan to use this area to build the company’s main hydroelectric power station. As part of the project three dams were built and in 1932, the hydroelectric power plant began supplying electricity to both sides of the border.

Today, Israel and Jordan have already begun to develop an outstanding example of a cross-border park in the area of the old hydroelectric power station on Al Bakoura - Peace Island. In 1994, with the signing of the Peace Treaty by Jordan and Israel, the island was leased with special usage and crossing status to Israeli and international tourists. It was thereafter called the "Peace Island." Thus far the tourism infrastructure is limited to the Israeli side of the island. Facilities include a small information center where one can find information on the history of the hydroelectric power station that existed some 60 years ago. For the price of 27 NIS ($6.00), a tour is offered where one can enter onto the Peace Island, catch a glimpse of the river beneath and see the remnants of the power station. Military personnel schedule and coordinate opening of the fences on both sides, allowing tens of thousands of visitors per year to enter the island without the need for a visa. This is an excellent example of a transboundary park, that FoEME proposes to extend down the Jordan River to the Three Bridges site 3 kilometers south.

The Gesher / 'Jesir al-Majami’ site of the Three Bridges serves as a visual example of the Valley’s rich cultural heritage and reflects the area's geographical and historical function as a crossing point over the Jordan River and as such a site of interaction and cooperation between the neighboring communities historical crossing point. The first bridge, built during the Roman period, connected the Decapolis cities of Beit She'an (known as Scythopolis in Roman times) on the western side of the Jordan River and the city of Umm Qais (Gadara) on the eastern side. During the fourteenth century, the Mamluks renovated the Roman Bridge and added a Khan on the ancient road to better control the crossing and provide services for passing caravans. The Ottoman's Hejaz railway system, completed in the area at the beginning of the twentieth century, built the second bridge at the site crossing over the Jordan River here. During the British Mandate Period, a third paved road bridge was constructed alongside a Taggert fort, customs house and quarantine, further reinforcing the political, military and economical importance of the region's historical crossing.

Today, on the Israeli side of the Three Bridges site, the area has been developed as a major tourist attraction. Numerous development initiatives have taken place at the site including the uncovering of the old Khan, the placing of a train on the Ottoman railway bridge and the restoration of a bus that historically traversed the bridge daily. A boardwalk was constructed in 2005 to allow tourists to go down to the riverbank to view the bridges and learn about the area's unique history. Over $250,000 has been invested at the site which is operated by the local Kibbutz. The site provides an important precedent for development initiatives and public access to the lower Jordan River in that a private company is allowed to open the military fence. An entrance fee of 29 NIS ($6.50) per person is changed and in 2005 the site counted over 40,000 visitors.
The Peace Island and Gesher sites provide unique precedents for expanding important agreements towards the creation of a cross border peace park in this area.

Establishing the Peace Park, would result in increasing the awareness of the potential benefits that can be obtained in terms of economical (tourism) development and ensuring the protection of the environment; management of biological diversity, of natural and associated cultural resources and to the promotion of peace and cooperation. The park would encourage regulated tourism, sustainable development and goodwill between neighboring countries.

The opening of the Al Bakoora and the Three Bridges site on the Jordanian side would provide the first tourist site along the River in the northern Jordan Valley. A transboundary park along both sides of the River would turn the area into a unique tourist attraction for both local and international visitors. As a Peace Park, international funding and assistance could especially be of interest to Jordan with the area developed to support rural tourism including overnight accommodation on the Jordanian side of the valley as well.

Additional plans for development in the areas to be included in the Jordan River Peace Park include the reflooding the "Rotenberg/ Abdullah Lake". The lake will serve to attract the more than 500 million migratory birds that cross the Jordan River Valley twice annually. Developing bird watching facilities throughout the Peace Park has great potential to bring a share of the estimated 60 million people in Europe and North America who spend time and money on this hobby to the region. Moreover, the buildings located adjacent to the power plant on Jordanian land, which were abandoned with the closing of the plant in 1948 and have a magnificent view of the Jordan River and the Peace Island could be renovated to serve as eco-lodges and information center. Furthermore, a nature trail could be developed discreetly hidden on both sides of the river bank enabling hikers, bikers and bird watchers to explore the 3 kilometer path of the valley from Bakoora to Gesher.

While current tourist infrastructure is less developed on the Jordanian side of the border, the few sustainable tourism projects that have been undertaken in Jordan such as the Dana Nature Reserve and the Aqaba Bird Sanctuary have been visited extensively by local, regional and international tourists. The creation of a protected area on both sides of the river will provide greater opportunities for biodiversity protection, cooperative management, joint research programs and collaboration on nature-based tourism.

On January 10th, 2007 support for the creation of the Jordan River Peace Park was formally endorsed in an historic Memorandum of Understanding signed between Mayors from Beit Shean and the Jordan Valley Regional Council in Israel and North Shuneh in Jordan. In signing the MoU the area's mayors recognized the value and importance of rehabilitating the Jordan River through the establishment of a cross border peace park.

In May 2008 an architectural design workshop, also known as a charrette, was held at the site. The charrette was led by architects from Yale University's Urban Design School, together with architects from Israel's Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design, and Jordanian and Palestinian architects. The workshop began with a tour of the proposed Jordan River Peace Park sites in both Israel and Jordan and continued with group working sessions in Jordan. Outcomes of the charrette including initial designs and phasing recommendations were subsequently presented to the public in Jerusalem and Amman.
Next Steps:

1) **Security Protocols:**
FoEME has the support of the UK Ministry of Defense to help us develop a set of security protocols for the Peace Park for the various stages of its development.

2) **Management Structure:**
FoEME is working through a SEED program associated private legal firm to develop the complex management structure necessary to take into account the different stakeholders, land owners and FoEME itself. The SEED program awards expert support from leading international agencies such as IUCN, UNEP and UNDP to selected organizations.

3) **Interpretation and Public Awareness:**
FoEME is launching a project to develop various informational brochures and park signage to enable visitation and increase public awareness of and at the Peace Park. The interpretation strategies are designed for visitors from a wide variety of backgrounds to sites of complex cultural and historical narratives.

4) **Staged Development:**
As part of the staged development of the Jordan River Peace Park, FoEME is currently finalizing the terms of the establishment of the Jordan River National Park in cooperation with the relevant ministers in Jordan. The Jordan River National Park refers to the areas of the proposed Jordan River Peace Park in Jordan (also known as Al-Bakoura area).

5) **Rehabilitation and Conservation Projects:**
FoEME is leading critical rehabilitation projects to protect sites of shared cultural heritage found in the area of the Jordan River Peace Park, beginning with the historic train station. Rehabilitation of the historical train station is supported by the Studiosus Foundation. The Studiosus tourism company, based in German, plans to visit the area of the proposed Peace Park as part of their regular tours to the region.