Friends of Earth Middle East proposes international Jordan River peace park

It was a simple drawing of blue, green and brown lines. But for a group of Jordanians and Israelis who met on Wednesday the colorful map depicted a future they all hope for: a trans-border ecological park with bike paths, nature trails, international bridges, archaeological sites, and—most importantly—a clean and full Jordan River.

The map was presented by Friends of Earth Middle East (FoEME) at the first meeting between the two sides at Three Bridges Park at Old Gesher on the Jordan River.

FoEME is the initiator and driving force behind the project which hopes will not only create bonds between the two peoples and increase ecotourism, but ultimately save the Jordan River too.

The famous river, which is described in the Bible and is a holy site for baptism, is all but empty. Once over a billion cubic meters of fresh water flowed through it. Today, just over 20 million cubic meters of saline water and some dumped sewage water make their way along its course. Israel diverts all the fresh water from the Sea of Galilee away from the river. Jordan is building a dam that stops the water from the Yarmouk River which is another source of the Jordan River.

“We predict by this summer the river will be dry,” said Gideon Bromberg, Israel director of FoEME.

It both the Jordanian and Israeli governments agree to the park, they will then need to allocate waters that they both divert to run down its natural path. FoEME said 250 million cubic meters would revitalize the river.

“We hope we can push our governments to revive this very important resource,” said Muntheq Mehyar, a Jordanian architect and environmentalist who is the chairman of FoEME.

Israeli officials expressed their approval of the project over a gourmet lunch which they shared with the Jordanians and some Palestinian officials from the Jordan Valley.

“We support tourism cooperation with Jordan for the length of our border with them,” said Hagit Ringel, director of international relations for the Ministry of Tourism.

Yael Shaltiel, head of the Beit She’an Valley Council told the group, “Now the civilians are getting back the Jordan River for themselves. I wish you success.”

Hillel Glassman, of the Nature Reserve Authority, also gave his blessing, saying that the Jordan River was “at the top of our agenda.” The Jewish National Fund representative agreed the park also needed the two governments to allocate lands. Currently the land near the river from the Sea of Galilee to the Dead Sea is in a closed military zone.

The group received permission to enter past the military fenced Bromberg pointed to the almost empty river, whose water was speckled with bubbles.

“The problem is that people don’t know the tragedy of the river,” he said. “If they did, they would cry out. They need to see it.”

The project would initially be in the area where Kibbutz Gesher opened a park called “Three Bridges,” where Roman, Ottoman and British bridges stand side by side. But FoEME hopes the park would then be expanded to connect with the Naharayim Peace Park a few kilometers north, where seven Israeli schoolgirls were murdered by a deranged Jordanian soldier.

Eventually the park would include seven archeological sites south of Three Bridges and connect kibbutzim Ashdot Ya’akov and Gesher with the Jordanian villages of Baqura and Shuna.

Ironically, the closed military zones around the river have preserved the pristine quality of the area, said Michael Turner, a renowned Israeli architect and longtime associate of FoEME.

Turner toured the river together with two others to prepare the project. Khaled Nasser, a Jordanian hydrologist will be planning water management for the project and Nader el-Khatib, a Palestinian environmentalist, will be planning biodiversity management. Turner, who is also chairman of the Israel committee of the World Heritage Foundation of UNESCO, prepared the map for FoEME.

The park will be open to tourists from both sides who would only use their national ID cards—not passports—to enter. The number of tourists will be limited.

“This won’t be St. Peter’s Cathedral with millions of visitors,” said Turner. “We want it to be environmentally sustainable.”