FoEME's Proposed Transboundary Peace Parks

Friends of the Earth Middle East (FoEME) is a regional organization that focuses on transboundary environmental issues. One of FoEME's main priority areas has been the rehabilitation of the Jordan River Valley. Sadly, excessive diversion and pollution of the Jordan River have left it little more than a sewage channel. At FoEME we believe that as long as the public is denied access to the river bank, the river will continue to be polluted and local residents will be denied the opportunity to develop the area for tourism. Our recent awareness campaign, “Let the Jordan River Flow,” aims to bring local, national and international attention to these issues and promote peace and prosperity for the Jordan River Valley and its residents.

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 Bakoora / Peace Island to the Three Bridges / Gesher 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 borders that are enclosed within its area are abolished. This includes removal of all forms of physical boundaries allowing free movement of people and animals within the area. A boundary around the area may however be maintained to prevent unauthorized border crossing. Such areas are also known as Peace Parks.

Peace Parks are transboundary protected areas that are formally dedicated to the protection and management of biological diversity, natural and associated cultural resources and the promotion of peace and cooperation. The parks encourage regulated tourism, sustainable development and goodwill between neighboring countries.

FoEME believes that the area between the Peace Island and the Three Bridges / Gesher as well as the baptism site at Kaser el Yehud and Bethany Beyond the Jordan have great potential to be developed into a Transboundary Protected Area, following the guidelines set forth by the IUCN.
Peace Island and the Three Bridges / Gesher Peace Park

The Bakoora Peace Island and the Three Bridges/ Gesher area uniquely combines many of the natural and cultural features of the Jordan Valley.

Bakoora 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 HM 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 Bakoora 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 primarily limited to the Israeli side opposite the Island and include a small information center where one can learn about the history of the hydroelectric power station that existed some 60 years ago. For the price of 27 shekels ($6), a tour is offered where one can enter 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 downriver to the Three Bridges/ Gesher site 3 kilometers south.

The Gesher / Three Bridges site serves as a visual example of the Valley’s historical crossing point and is of equal cultural importance to both countries. A Roman Bridge, built over 2000 years ago, was erected by Roman rulers connecting the cities of that period; Beit Shean (today in Israel), Pella and Um Quais (today in Jordan). An old Khan (inn) from the Middle Ages stands at the site, and represents a place where merchants and travelers crossing the river would stop for a place to rest and feed their animals. During the Ottoman Empire a railway bridge was built, connecting the Mediterranean port of Akko with Damascus. The Ottoman Turks also built a customs house and police station at the site. In the 1920s, the British Mandate authorities added a third bridge, for motor vehicles, linking the area with Tiberias on the Sea of Galilee and Damascus in Syria.

Today, the Israeli side of the Gesher/ Three Bridges site has been developed as a major tourist attraction with the uncovering of the old Khan, the placing of a train on the old tracks and the restoration of a bus that historically traversed the bridge daily. A boardwalk down to the riverbank has been built for easy viewing and learning about the history of the three bridges site. Over $250,000 has thus far been invested at the site, which officially opened to tourists last year. Furthermore, an important precedent was created by which the local kibbutz operating the tourist site opens the military fence for individuals and groups who pay an entry charge of 29 shekel ($6.5) per person. In 2005, the newly opened site had approximately 40,000 visitors.

Although the Jordan River and the cultural landscape is itself one of the key natural features, the flora and fauna of the valley greatly contribute to its distinction. The valley is characterized by steppe vegetation along its banks where the endemic plant species Tamarix Jordanis thrives. Regionally endangered, threatened and rare species such as the Syrian Hyena, the Caracal and the mountain Gazelles are dependent on the valley’s natural vegetation.
Additional plans for development of the Peace Island and the “Three Bridges / Gesher" Peace Park include the reflooding the "Rotenberg/ Abdullah Lake" situated at the center of Peace Island. 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 Bakoora to Gesher 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 an eco-lodge 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 tourism 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.

Although a border zone is understandably necessary, both Jordan and Israel have already created the precedent of opening the border fence for controlled guided tourism at several locations. For Israel the border is opened at Bakoora and Gesher and for Jordan at the Bethany Beyond the Jordan River Baptism site in the south of the valley, discussed further below.

Bethany Beyond the Jordan and Kaser el Yehud Baptism Site Peace Park

As part of the FoEME's action plan to rehabilitate the Jordan River, FoEME recognizes the importance of the Christian Baptism site on both the eastern and western sides of the River Jordan. At present the west bank site of Kaser el Yehud located just north of the Dead Sea and incorporating four churches of different denominations including Greek Orthodox, Coptic Orthodox, Armenian and Ethiopian Churches is unfortunately closed to the public for most of the year. Conversely, on the eastern side of the Jordan River, the Bethany Beyond the Jordan Baptist site has been well developed to include walking trails and guided tours. According to the Jordanian Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities, the site has attracted an estimated 61,000 tourists since 2004. International visitors are charged 5 Jordanian Dinars for a guided tour of the site.

Similar to the Three Bridges/ Gesher Peace Park proposal, FoEME believes the cross border area of Kaser el Yehud and Bethany Beyond the Jordan baptism sites has great potential to be developed into a “Transboundary Protected Area" or Peace Park.

At present, FoEME's strategy is to coordinate between Jericho Municipality and the Israeli Authorities to permit organized tours of the Baptism site on the western side of the river bank. FoEME envisions the possibility of guided pilgrim tours coordinated by a Palestinian tour company. In the first phase, this company will run daily bus tours that will include a visit to the Mount of Temptation Monastery, other Christian religious sites in the Jericho area, and Kaser el Yehud followed by lunch in Jericho. An all inclusive fee would be charged, the revenue of which will serve to boost the local economy while increased access to the Baptism site will help justify
the need to rehabilitate the Jordan River. In the future, FoEME hopes to establish a cross border Peace Park in the area of the baptism sites allowing visitors to cross the river at the unified historic site.

As discussed earlier, the opening of the military area to provide access to the Jordan River has its precedent on both sides of the river. FoEME believes that opening select areas along the border to the public would restore a sense of pride to the inhabitants of the Jordan River Valley. Moreover, it will undoubtedly provide economic benefits through tourism, new opportunities for local populations, justify river rehabilitation and would promote peace and understanding.