

## NEW ECOCENTER PROVIDES OPPORTUNITY FOR RESEARCH IN A PALESTINIAN BIODIVERSITY HOTSPOT

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Keywords: Palestine, ecotourism, biodiversity, migratory corridor, spring, water scarcity, FoEME



Fig 3. Al Auja EcoCenter



Fig 2. *Jaculus orientalis* (jerboa) (Mohanah Saaideh)

WME News Vol 6 Issue 1 discussed how vital it is to rehabilitate the ecological integrity of the Jordan River Valley. As a crossroads between Africa, Asia, and Europe, this migratory corridor sees more than 500 million migratory birds cross the Jordan River Valley biannually. An area where rehabilitation efforts should be focused due to its extraordinary biodiversity is the biogeographic zone of Al Auja, which stretches from the Auja Spring in the West to the Jordan River in the East, about 20km north of Jericho.

The surface water and groundwater that collects in the stream flowing from the Auja Spring has sustained different ecological zones based on varying vegetation type and water availability. These habitats have supported an incredible diversity of plant and animal life. Lying in the Jordan Valley, this area is classified as an important wetland area and Important Bird Area. The area hosts more than 240 species of plants, many of which have historic and medicinal significance. Common to the region are date palms (*Phoenix dactylifera*). In dense riparian reed beds, tall reeds (*Phragmites communis*) have provided feeding and roosting areas for birds such as herons and warblers (several species of each), and a refuge for mammals such as Wild Boar (*Sus scrofa*) and Red Fox (*Vulpes vulpes palaestina*). Tamarisk (*Tamarix syriaca*) and acacia (*Acacia raddiana* and *Acacia tortilis*) woodlands have supported animals such as turtle dove (*Streptopelia turtur*), palm dove (*Streptopelia senegalensis*), and the Dead Sea sparrow (*Passer moabiticus*). Scrub, arid wadi foothills and salty and brackish water marshes all have their share of creatures too. The agricultural landscapes of the lower flatlands have, historically, also been a highly important niche for animals.

The key resource in this ecosystem is water. When abundant water flows through the spring, it supports many species, including various birds that are seasonal visitors, passage migrants, or residents. It is normal for the spring to decrease its flow in the drier months, but in the past seven years the spring has only flowed from February to April, and sometimes much less. The underlying cause of this reduction in flow is currently being investigated, and Friends of the Earth Middle East (FoEME) will publish a hydrological report soon. Although there has not been a comprehensive survey done to assess habitat degradation and species loss, it is clear that the ecosystem has been dealt a severe blow.

The animals of the previous agricultural landscapes in the vast flatlands near the Jordan River have also found their habitat and resources destroyed by the drying up of the spring, mostly due to the disappearance of thousands of hectares of agriculture that was once thriving farmland. Palestinians have abandoned their farms due to the lack of water, and many are now working on Israeli farms to which most of the Auja spring water is sent. Not surprisingly, this has had catastrophic effects on the economy of Al Auja and the livelihood of its people, in addition to having dramatic ecological consequences. Walking around the bone-dry abandoned farms, it is hard to imagine the fields and wadis that were teeming with wildlife before the spring dried up, as the local people describe it. Small animals that called the farms their home, such as hedgehogs (*Erinaceus sacer*), hares (*Lepus syriacus*), mice (i.e. *Acomys russatus harrisoni*), mongoose (*Herpestes ichneumon*), and many birds, are seen less and less. New species that are better adapted to desert-like conditions are coming in

to take their place, such as the Palestinian viper (*Vipera palaestina*), the Egyptian cobra (*Naja haje*), and the jerboa (*Jaculus orientalis*).

Despite the seemingly hopeless nature of this situation the Auja Center for Environmental Education and Ecotourism Development located in Al Auja village is addressing this issue and the general lack of environmental awareness in the occupied Palestinian territories. The goal of the center is to "alleviate the impact of water scarcity and environmental degradation on Palestinian communities through education about environmental and water realities and widespread dissemination of conservation measures." The center draws Palestinian and International visitors from schools and other groups and teaches them about local environmental issues while allowing them to become immersed in Palestinian village culture. Visitors have the option to go on tours of nearby natural areas with experts in the environmental and ecological fields. Despite the ecological damage, many species are resilient. Also, other nearby areas are still quite ecologically sound. Visitors have reported a thrilling experience as they observe these austere desert-like hills and wadis come alive.

It is a goal of the EcoCenter to turn this area into a popular ecotourism destination. The Auja Center could then be utilized as a model for other Palestinian communities on how to innovatively rebuild an economy while also preserving a precious natural and cultural heritage. In addition to ecotourists, the Center wants to attract researchers and other people with specific interests in the flora and fauna of the area. A second survey of biodiversity could be a fascinating opportunity for researchers, and it would also provide essential information for conservation efforts. The Center is an ideal base for explorations into natural areas and a rich source of knowledge about these areas, the life found in them, and the threats they face. All profits from the Center's guesthouse are invested into local environmental initiatives.

### Acknowledgements and References

Conservation biologist and natural heritage specialist Sami Backleh (sbackleh@qlf.org) and the Palestine Wildlife Society provided invaluable information for this article.

For more information about the EcoCenter, please visit [www.jvec.ps](http://www.jvec.ps) or Auja EcoCenter on Facebook

For more information about FoEME please visit [www.foeme.org](http://www.foeme.org).



Fig 1. Riparian zone and surrounding foothills of Al Auja spring (Mohanah Saaideh)