

WARS AND WILDFLOWERS IN THE MIDDLE EAST

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Aqaba, Jordan. The scene in the hotel conference room was not the stuff of usual Mideast politics. Here were Iranian, Lebanese, Saudi and Israeli specialists seated on the same panel, sharing experiences, listening patiently to one another, and even displaying an occasional sign of empathy. These individuals, along with hundreds more like them – Middle Eastern scientists, government professionals and environmental activists – were gathered at the first meeting of the Middle Eastern Biodiversity Network to discuss a common goal: the survival of the region's flora and fauna.

As is the case globally, the future does not look good for the rarest of animals and plants in the Middle East. While most of the participants were attending the conference to refine their methods on how to create inventories of the regions biodiversity – to identify and count what animals and plants are found in our region – the undercurrent throughout the conference was that this was the last chance to observe and learn about many earthly creatures. Extinctions weighed heavily on the minds of many participants.

No one projected this feeling more than an ecologist from Dubai, in the United Arab Emirates – home of the world's tallest buildings, burgeoning financial markets, and lavish resorts. He described a rate of development on the Arabian Gulf coastline that was so accelerated that all he and his colleagues could do to catalogue local biodiversity was to collect "baseline" ecological data before those habitats were paved over. Under this scale of development pressure, protecting species is nearly impossible; scientists can only hope to learn about them after they're gone.

The many regional conflicts – in Iraq, Lebanon, Israel and Palestine, Cyprus and southeastern Turkey – were not an explicit topic of any talks, but their negative impact on biodiversity weaved its way into many narratives. A Cypriot ecologist described illegal hunting along the border between Turkish and Greek Cyprus. An Iraqi ornithologist quipped that he needed two eyes to identify his birds and two more in the back of his head to avoid being shot. A Lebanese botanist who had just published a popular volume about his country's rare flowers was asked by an Israeli colleague why his country didn't have laws to protect wild flowers as they did in Israel. The botanist responded dryly, "My government is busy dealing with other things."



Fig1. The meeting of wildlife and development. (©Declan O'Donovan).

Poverty, crime, pollution and overexploitation of resources were other implicit themes in many talks. An Iraqi ecologist described the tragic loss of wetlands in the country's southern region due to the combined impact of drought and dams. The Omani park manager shared images of slaughter and poaching of his endangered Arabian oryx, yet he wouldn't (or couldn't?) reveal to the curious audience who the poachers were, saying only "they are a large and well organized group." The decline of the Red Sea corals in the Gulf of Aqaba was attributed by an Israeli marine biologist to a veritable rogues' gallery of causes over the past 50 years, including release of exotic species in ship ballast water, chemical and oil spills, fish farm effluents, smothering by sand brought to tourist beaches, and damage caused by tourists collecting, trampling and dropping anchors on the reefs.

But for all the expertise assembled in the hotel conference rooms – arguably the best naturalists and ecologists in the Middle East – there was little evidence of viable solutions. The flora and fauna in the Middle East, several areas of which are considered to be "biodiversity hotspots" by global environmental organizations, are threatened. But while these scientists are able to document species' decline, they have little power to stop it.

The causes of our biodiversity crisis, like the causes of many of our global environmental problems, are rooted in broad, systemic problems: Wars, military training and arms races in the Middle East directly degrade the natural environment, but also insidiously distract us and divert our limited economic and political resources, from not only caring for our natural heritage, but for people as well. The gospel of economic growth churns up ecosystem after ecosystem, and with them some of the most beautiful natural assets the earth has to offer and a source of wonder and appreciation to people. Population growth places increasing stress on hydrological systems and land reserves that must continue to provide raw materials, food, water and space to an ever growing population.

The solutions will require the expertise and commitment of a larger, global community, including statesmen, policy makers, economic leaders, activists, scientists and other members of civil society. The problems are not insurmountable, but time is not on our side. A promising sign is the increasing realization within the growing environmental movement that peace, social justice and economic equity are likely prerequisites for true environmental sustainability. Another encouraging sign is that 500 scientists from the politically turbulent Middle East can sit down and cooperatively address regional and global ecological challenges. Let's hope, for our sake and the sake of the other species on the planet, that our leaders can do the same.

Article kindly reprinted from Providence Journal. Daniel Orenstein is a post-doctoral fellow at the Faculty of Architecture and Town Planning at the Technion – Israel Institute of Technology, and visiting fellow at the Watson Institute for International Policy at Brown University.



Fig2. Development over the Mediterranean Coastal Dunes in Israel (©Daniel Orenstein).