

## THE REVIVAL OF THE HIMA SYSTEM IN LEBANON

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Ever since its foundation in 1986, the Society for the Protection of Nature in Lebanon (SPNL [www.spnlb.org](http://www.spnlb.org)) has advocated the establishment of protected areas. Together with the Lebanese Ministry of Environment they have initiated projects for protected areas within Lebanon. After twenty years of experience working in nature reserves with government agencies and due to the increased concern at local, national and international levels for co-management of natural resources, SPNL is now reviving and advocating the use of the Hima system which has been prevalent in the Arabic region for the last 2000 years.

The Hima is a traditional protected area which involves the sustainable use of natural resources by and for the local communities surrounding the Hima. This indirectly benefits the conservation of biodiversity together with the natural and cultural heritage of the area. Historically, governance of Himas was initiated and handled solely by tribal chiefs in Arabia. Later it was handed over to religious leaders to ensure benefits to the underprivileged people in communities and within tribes. In countries of the near East, such as Lebanon this was later transferred to municipalities and other democratically elected bodies. This transfer ensured equity and the fair use of resources whilst sustaining the natural resources of the Hima. During the last thirty to fifty years, most countries in the Middle East have neglected the Hima system. More recently the region has witnessed the advocacy and adoption of other categories of Protected Areas managed by governmental agencies.

SPNL has been working on the Important Bird Areas (IBA) programme since 1994 and this has resulted in four sites being identified by SPNL/BirdLife International as IBAs, namely; Ammiq Wetlands, Chouf Cedar Nature Reserve, Ehdn Forest Nature Reserve, and Palm Islands Nature Reserves. More recent research in 2005 has identified a further five new sites. The ultimate aim of the IBA programme is the conservation of these sites. Some of these could be best preserved through community based conservation and the Hima system.

The limited ownership of the local communities within the current centralized system of protected areas has resulted in limited benefit sharing with local community groups. SPNL therefore, is hoping to gain stronger support for the Hima practice as a viable and sustainable alternative to nationally designated protected areas. The increased involvement of local communities and the benefits derived from protection will ultimately result in improved status of the natural resources themselves.

The overall goal of the Hima revival is to mesh traditional practices with recent conservation science as a way to reach sustainable development. Since 2004, SPNL has re-established two Himas, in two key biodiversity areas; namely Ebel es-Saqi in South Lebanon and Kfar Zabad wetland in the Bekaa region.

Another example of the Hima system is the Ammiq Marsh (Lebanon's most significant remaining natural freshwater site and one of the few in the Middle East). This major stop-over site for migrating birds was under severe threat. Since 1996, A Rocha Lebanon (<http://en.arocha.org/lebanon/>) has been initiating conservation programmes with private landowners, local communities and religious groups in the west Bekaa. Additionally it has worked nationally to engage religious communities in nature conservation and sustainable resource management. During the same period, work with the landowners of the Ammiq Marsh using Hima principles has led to the protection and restoration of this internationally important wetland. This is a unique project in Lebanon and has resulted in the cooperation between private landowners and an N.G.O. which has created the country's first private reserve which is now a designated Ramsar site.



Wetland Hima of Kfar Zabad (©SPNL).

### Why Hima?

The Hima provides an approach through which conservation can be linked to the community. IBAs are identified on the basis of biology and geography. Designation as an IBA does not mean that a site is, or should be, protected under any formal mechanism, neither does the list of IBAs in itself constitute a conservation plan.

In Lebanon, it will not be feasible or desirable to designate every IBA as a formal Protected Area. Resource limitation, conflicting land ownership and high opportunity costs in productive landscapes often make this difficult. Also, formal Protected Area designation may not necessarily be the most effective approach to site-based protection, especially where many people live in and/or use an IBA. Indeed, in some circumstances, formal Protected Area designation could be counter-productive to conservation objectives, particularly where current Protected Area regulations (i.e. Nature Reserve) restricts traditional land and natural resource use practices that are compatible with or contribute to the biological value of a site.

In such circumstances, alternative approaches to site-based protection of IBAs are needed. These could include community managed conservation areas, or private reserves, through voluntary agreements with land owners, tribes and religious groups. They could be classified as Himas, thus complementing the Nature Reserve Category.

In many cases, the Hima approach may be cost-effective and help to engage support from sources not used or available to Nature Reserves. Hima status may also provide greater opportunities for sustainable human use of natural resources, and therefore, make a greater contribution to poverty alleviation for people whose use of natural resources forms a critical component of their livelihood strategies.



Wetland Hima of Kfar Zabad ©SPNL.