

Following demise of Med-Dead canal project

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## Dead Sea doomed to sticky future

By ABRAHAM RABINOVICH

The Dead Sea – the world's lowest and saltiest – will get much lower, saltier and smellier in the wake of this week's official scrapping of the Mediterranean-Dead Sea project that would have artificially raised its level.

"The level will fall by at least 100 metres in the coming centuries and the sea will end up having the consistency of porridge and covered by a film of salt," says Uri Wurzbeger, the geologist who headed the Mediterranean-Dead Sea project.

The level of the Dead Sea has varied widely over time as a result of changes in rainfall. Since the beginning of this century, it has fallen by 13 metres to its present level of 403 metres below sea level. What has made its current retreat different from previous falls is that for the past two decades it has been induced mainly by the hand of man, which is expected to prove far more relentless than nature.

Since Israel began drawing water from Lake Kinneret for its national water carrier and Jordan began tapping the Yarmuk River for its Ghor water project, inflow into the landlocked sea from the Jordan River – by far its main source – has fallen from 1.2-1.4 billion cubic metres of water a year to one quarter of that figure.

The surface of the sea has contracted by a quarter since the begin-

ning of the century to 800 square kilometres and the fall in sea level, 40 centimetres a year in recent decades, can be seen in satellite photographs.

The "tongue" area, near Masada, dried up about 10 years ago, thus separating the sea to its north from the evaporation ponds of the Dead Sea Works to its south. That area was once a shallow part of the sea and is today fed by a canal from the sea.

Wurzbeger expects the rate of decline to slow up as the saline content of the water increases, thereby slowing the evaporation process. A bowl of Dead Sea water today will evaporate only half as fast as a bowl of fresh water. In time, the mineral-heavy water will be further protected from evaporation by a film of salt on the surface.

"The Dead Sea will never dry up," said Wurzbeger this week in Tel Aviv.

The depth of the northern end of the Dead Sea is 330 metres, so that even if it loses 100 metres or so, it will still be a substantial lake.

The retreat of the Dead Sea poses a major problem for tourism officials wishing to site hotels along its shifting shores. The shores themselves would become mud flats. In addition, Ein Fash'ha and other fresh water springs in the area are shifting as the sea level falls, says Wurzbeger, and the smell of sulphur hyd-

rogen along the shores can be expected to increase.

The highly profitable Dead Sea Works – and its smaller Jordanian counterpart – will presumably harvest the waters with even greater ease as its mineral content increases. The benefit of sunlight to sufferers of skin diseases in the thickened atmosphere at the bottom of the earth will presumably increase as visitors follow the retreating sea further and further below sea level.

But the magnificent reflecting pool that is the Dead Sea will become a shrunken, sludgy lake surrounded by dried-up mud flats.

It was not to save the Dead Sea that the canal project was initiated, but to provide electricity, the raising of the sea level being merely a spin-off. Although the Jordanian government, which shares the sea with Israel, objected forcefully to the proposal, says Wurzbeger, Jordanian engineers and geologists favoured raising the sea level and even ordered a pre-feasibility study from a foreign firm for a proposed canal from Aqaba to the Dead Sea. A parallel route from Eilat had been studied by Wurzbeger's team but was discarded in favour of the Mediterranean route.

Politics permitting, the two countries could conceivably make common cause in building a canal that would revive a great natural resource that they share.