

Summer
1990
Israel
Landscape
&
Nature

Observations:

YOHANAN DAROM

Dear reader,

Shalom!

Israel's open-space landscapes may be the country's largest endangered natural feature. Rocky hills, desert canyons, beaches and vacant lots constitute the open landscape so essential to a sense of the land. The SPNI is on the watch to guard against its too hasty development. We present a report on this crucial aspect of nature protection.

ROTEM, the Israel Plant Information Center, is busy identifying and studying our flora. Researchers have recently re-classified a rare crocus in the Negev desert. We share this discovery with you.

Every five years, we provide our readers with an index to the articles published in the previous 20 issues of ILAN. The index was largely prepared by our volunteers, whom we thank most heartily for their invaluable contribution.

Our usual departments reflect the ramified ongoing activities of the SPNI, as we enter the 16th year of publication of ILAN.

- the editor

Ya'el Chaver

Water is the most common substance on the face of the earth - yet man is able to utilize only a minute proportion of it. Nonetheless, we are extremely wasteful of this treasure: all over the world, water sources are being polluted, water landscapes are being damaged, and the sea - the largest reservoir of all - is being treated as a gigantic garbage can.

Israel's national water system consists of three main reservoirs: the coastal aquifer (underground water reservoir), the hill region aquifer, and the Sea of Galilee. These sources are administered as a national system by Israel's National Water Carrier organization.

Regional organizations are responsible for transferring water from areas with a surplus to areas which are short of water. The national reservoirs are utilized in coordination; the water flow is regulated and adjusted according to availability and suitability for specific purposes.

Thus, cooperation between the regional bodies enables Israel's water supply to be regulated on the basis of regional needs, seasonal availability and long-term amounts of water.



Where have the streams gone?

Many Israelis vividly remember the streams which flowed across the country's coastal plain to the Mediterranean. They sustained a rich variety of plant and animal life, thanks to the fresh water which they carried all year round. However, this is no longer so.

For several years now, perennial

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DB # 5524

streams like Nahal Na'aman and the Biblical Nahal Qishon, in northern Israel, have been carriers of pollution: farming insecticides and chemicals are pouring into their waters and turning them into very real dangers to the coastal aquifer which they feed.

In the central coastal plain, Nahal Hadera and Nahal Alexander are recognizable today mainly by their fetid odor rather than by the lush vegetation which lined their banks in times past. The Yarqon River, Israel's second-largest, is currently an antithesis of the fresh, green water landscape which people used to enjoy when paddling upstream.

Further south, Nahal HaBessor is proving to be a conduit for poisonous materials from the hazardous waste burial site at Ramat Hovav. These materials are being leached from the site and have reached the center of the valley bed, endangering the aquifer which supplies the majority of Israel's population with fresh drinking water.*



Change of emphasis required

In the first years of Israel's existence, the course of development was dictated by the young country's immediate needs. There was no time then for a thorough examination of natural resources. Over the ensuing decades, this attitude has become a bad habit. The examination of resources and their allocation on the basis of objective priorities as well as future needs was not given proper emphasis.

The water resources of the country suffered the same fate. Experts have been warning against the long-term consequences of this attitude, yet to no avail.

For example, the 1987 State Comptroller's report stated that the coastal aquifer had been overpumped; and that as a result levels of fresh water were dropping fast, leading to danger of salination by Mediterranean sea water. If this should occur, the entire freshwater reservoir of the coastal area would become unusable. Similar findings of encroaching deterioration in water quality were made with reference to the other freshwater reservoirs of the country.

It is time to work out a comprehensive master plan for conservation of water sources. Such a plan should include the wise utilization of existing sources, the development of additional sources, the allocation and marketing of water, the use of inferior-quality water, etc. It would then be possible to set long- and short-range priorities for the restoration and development of water sources.

The SPNI is extremely concerned with the position of Israel's water as a limited resource which is vital to our physical existence. In this case, it is impossible to separate the "philosophical" aspects of nature conservation from "real-life" aspects.

Israel's fresh-water resources deserve a position high on the public agenda; our very lives depend upon wise planning and management of this resource. □

* See Beersheva alert: chemical industries as an ecological problem, in ILAN, vol. 14, no. 2 (Winter 1988/89).

YOHANAN DAROM
coordinating
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on natural
conservation