

Shades of Green

Environmental Protection in Israel

At the beginning of the twentieth century, a young engineer named Novomeysky visited Palestine. He saw the possibility of establishing a chemical industry to exploit the Dead Sea resources, and it fired his imagination.

About one hundred years later, in January 2001, the Knesset set up the Commission on Future Generations – the voice of the coming generations. The Commission on Future Generations regards environmental quality as a key issue with long-term repercussions for the health, welfare and quality of life for future generations.

Actually, the two aforementioned events encompass the entire situation: exploitation of resources, on the one hand, and the voice and rights of future generations, on the other.

The State of Israel, which faces daily existential questions as well as security and economic threats, spent its first twenty years realizing its vision: It absorbed immigrants, built feverishly, established infrastructures, developed intensive agriculture and accelerated industrialization, while disregarding the environmental effects brought about by these processes.

Years of non-awareness caused the country to ignore the environmental effects and place them at the bottom of the

which served as an advisory body to the government and decision makers. For the first time, the country introduced environmental considerations into the planning and decision-making process in an official, binding manner.

In 1989, the Knesset established the Ministry of Environmental Affairs. This ministry operates in accordance with the basic policies, which stipulate that “the government will protect the quality of the environment, act to prevent air and water pollution, and strive to eliminate or reduce various ecological hazards.”

Despite the difficulties, and with the increase in Israel’s standard of living, there has been a steady increase in public awareness of matters such as public health and environmental quality. This heightened awareness creates a need and demand for providing proper

environmental conditions. As a result, we are witness to a broadening of environmental activities at the state, regional and local levels.

This article does not purport to claim that Israel’s environmental situation is fine and needs no improvement. The scope of the problems is highly significant: The plethora of organizations operating in the field; the overlapping in terms of the definition of powers; the obscuring of boundaries; the embracing of know-how and standards that are right for other countries but not necessarily suitable for Israel’s conditions and needs – all these must be discussed, changed and corrected. Nevertheless, we mustn’t discount

the activities and the broad extent of the country’s environmental commitment.

Awareness of environmental problems and their sources, exposure to overseas standardization, legislation, approaches and handling methods, and the shift from the “putting out the fire” method to an educated analysis of priorities and needs have led the Knesset to enact broader environmental legislation. The purpose of such legislation and sectoral directives is to protect water sources from contamination and salinization; ensure recycling and decrease



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national agenda. This led the Israel of the 70s to a situation in which its rivers and coasts were polluted with industrial and domestic waste: Industry, transportation and energy production constituted significant sources of air pollution, and the quantity of all types of waste steadily increased, while the amount of open space progressively decreased.

In the second half of the 70s, there was a kind of environmental turning point in Israel:

In 1973, Israel established the Environmental Quality Service,

waste volumes; solve problems common to production processes constituting a source of environmental hazards (industrial waste and air pollution); upgrade waste purification plants and establish standards that are among the world's most stringent regarding the quality and uses of the sludge originating from these waste purification plants; set up stations for measuring air pollution originating from transportation systems and industrial plants; involve environmental organizations' representatives in the



planning processes; and take environmental considerations into account.

In 1999, at the request of the Ministry of Environmental Affairs and the JNF (Jewish National Fund), experts formulated a multiyear work plan for rehabilitating Israel's rivers. The work plan recommends an order of priorities for drawing up and implementing the budgetary scopes required for achieving the goals.

Two other facts are also of note: the considerable progress that has been made in internalizing transparency principles and the publication of environmental information and activities on the global level. Examples of the latter include the signing of international pacts, e.g. the Barcelona Convention for the protection of the marine environment, and the Kyoto Protocol for the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions, which led to relevant environmental legislation and environmental activities in the spirit of the various pacts and protocols.

In his article entitled "National Priorities in the Marine Environment in Israel," Dr. Yuval Cohen, of the Israel Oceanographic and Limnological Research Institute, lists the three main environmental problems affecting Israel's coasts and coastal waters: disturbance of the sand balance along the Mediterranean coast; marine and coastal pollution; and changes

in the biological diversity and destruction of unique natural assets in the coastal waters. These problems exist at varying degrees of severity in all the countries that border on the sea. Dr. Cohen further states that, in the past three decades, the scope and degree of severity of Israel's coastal and marine pollution, both in the Mediterranean and the Gulf of Eilat, have decreased considerably. Currently, the level of overall pollution is not high vis-à-vis the commonly accepted environmental quality indices

worldwide, but there are still significant local pollution problems, the worst of which is the pollution of Haifa Bay.

As an achievement, we can cite the fact that, in 2003, Israel had 30 operating regional purification plants that annually treat 332 million m³ of waste (approximately 74% of the annual waste produced) and provide proper sewerage services to the majority of the population.

Working in conjunction with the branches of the Ministry of Environmental Affairs are municipal unions and local bodies such as environmental units within the local authorities. These bodies are responsible for establishing operating conditions for industrial plants and businesses to prevent environmental hazards and problems, and to protect the infrastructures through supervision and enforcement systems.

This article would be incomplete if it failed to mention the local bodies' joint activities with representatives of the various green organizations. The aim of these activities is to involve the public in neighborhood and regional projects to effect change in the residents' views and gain their cooperation in defining and realizing the vision of improving the quality of life and the environment.

The realization that educating the public is the key to producing achievements has yielded initiatives and activities designed for preschoolers, elementary school pupils and adults. Beach and river cleanup projects, the establishment of environmental studies tracks, biotopes training, exhibitions, recycling campaigns and various competitions are all routine activities that contribute to the improvement trend.

An ever-increasing number of academic institutions in Israel are establishing tracks for the various aspects of environmental sciences. This not only furthers the topic, but also produces skilled professionals, who will eventually take their place at the forefront of environmental activities.

In conclusion, although Israel is faced with a range of environmental problems requiring proper attention and quick solutions, we are pleased to point out that shades of green are also evident in the country.