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TODAY'S SPONSOR

ENN FULL STORY

Israelis and Palestinians Clean up Rivers to Save Endangered Turtles, Improve Drinking Water

February 08, 2005 — By Laurie Copans, Associated Press

JERUSALEM — In an area of olive and avocado groves northeast of Tel Aviv, a river of sewage snakes from the Palestinian city of Tulkarem, under Israel's separation barrier and into a river where an endangered species of soft-shelled turtle once thrived.

Even as Israel built the barrier and violence raged between the sides for more than four years, local Israelis and Palestinians cooperated to clean up the Alexander River -- which drains into the Mediterranean Sea -- and its main tributary, the Nablus River.

They hope not only to save the rivers and the life they support, but also the underground aquifer the people share.

Soon, with German aide, a treatment plant will be opened in Tulkarem, cleaning up pollution from olive oil presses, car garages and sewage that flows into the Nablus River, officials said.

In 2001, work began to set up a water purification plant on the Israeli side and then direct the Palestinian pollution into it. The decision by local leaders to cooperate came despite the beginning of fighting at the end of 2000.

"Even during the toughest times we always found a way to meet," said Israeli architect Amos Brandeis, chief planner of the Alexander River restoration project. The officials often met in secret places on either side, even a hospital, so as not to antagonize opponents, Brandeis said.

The Alexander River sustains between 70 and 100 Nile soft-shelled turtles, the largest remaining population in the world of the species, listed as "critically endangered" by the World Conservation Union. These animals can grow as long as 120 centimeters (47 inches) and live in brackish water, feeding on worms and other river creatures small enough for them to catch.

Other groups of the turtles live in Turkey and Egypt.

The German Development Bank KfW and German Agency for Technical Cooperation GTZ have

donated a total of euro20 million (US\$26 million) for the rebuilding of the Palestinian sewage system and the directing of the waste to the Israeli treatment plant, Brandeis said.

Nahum Itzkovitz, who initiated the cooperation as head of Israel's Emek Hefer regional council, said without foreign assistance, Israel would have had to invest heavily to clean up the Palestinian effluent that ran from the West Bank hills into the area where 45,000 Israelis live. Since the Palestinians had no money for the project, the Israelis sought out the German funding.

Cleaning up of the rivers on either the West Bank or the Israeli side means a cleaner underground aquifer, said Rayeq Hamad, the manager of the Palestinian side of the project. This was especially important for the 85,000 Palestinians living in the Tulkarem area, since they rely heavily on a clean aquifer for their drinking water, he said.

The Palestinians are much more open to better relations with Israel now, Hamad said.

"Whenever you improve the living conditions of people, it also improves their relations with their neighbors," he said.

The officials don't hide their contacts these days, as their leaders work to end the fighting. About 150 Israelis and Palestinians met this week in Tulkarem at a ceremony to mark the renovation of the city's sewage system.

"There is a very strong will on both sides to do this and slowly the conditions are improving to let this happen," Brandeis said.

Source: Associated Press

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