

Peace Through Restoration

Alexander River Restoration Project

Against a backdrop of suicide bombers, sieges, fences and vitriolic politics, Palestinian and Israeli ecological restorationists and local authorities have been working together peacefully and collaboratively to solve their common environmental problems.

The ribbon-cutting ceremony in the Palestinian city of Tul Karem in early 2005, marked the completion of a landmark phase of the Alexander River Restoration Project, which was launched in 1995. Careful and respectful negotiations between Palestinian and Israeli restorationists and engineers were facilitated by their German colleagues, and touched on the most minute details: Israelis supplied the tent; Palestinians supplied the chairs. Palestinians brought the food; Israelis brought the drinks. Each invited exactly 75 guests. Same-sized flags of Palestine, the Palestinian city Tul Karem, Israel and the Israeli Regional Council of Emek Hefer, were symmetrically arranged at the front.

“Even during the hardest times of the *intifada*, we were in constant contact with our Palestinian colleagues and continued to work together,” said Amos Brandeis, the Israeli manager and chief planner the Alexander River Restoration Project. Brandeis spoke at a Special Plenary session during the SER International World Conference on Ecological Restoration in Zaragoza, Spain in September, describing how collaborating on ecological restoration can also be a bridge to peace between people. Describing secret meetings between the Israeli and Palestinian restorationists during the worst months of violence that took place at a hospital in East Jerusalem, Brandeis said, “We agreed never to discuss politics, but only to discuss the project, and we all kept to that agreement.”

Located in the Tel Aviv metro area and bordering the Palestinian cities of Nablus and Tul Karem and the villages between them, the Alexander River became an environmental problem in the mid 1990s, when the Palestinian areas experienced a building boom. All the new houses were connected to a central sewage system that runs into the upper part of the Alexander River. Half of the sewage penetrates into the groundwater that both Israelis and Palestinians drink. The other the sewage simply runs under the fence. Until 1996, the local drainage authority built a small dirt dam on the river every summer so that the sewage would not reach the lower Alexander River. But after 1996, the dirt dam collapsed and the sewage flowed into the river.

“The head of our Regional Council contacted the Palestinian governor of Tul Karem,” said Brandeis. “We met with him and brought a formal treaty that we asked him to sign that said we would, together, sort out this environmental problem that was causing their citizens and our citizens to suffer.” The governor called then-Palestinian Authority Chairman Yasser Arafat to seek guidance, and Arafat said if the Israelis would allocate international funds for the project, Tul Karem should cooperate. The Israelis agreed, and the governor signed the treaty.



After 2003

The Israeli-Palestinian team met and began to identify the sources of pollution, coming up with more than 70, from sewage to stone-cutting and olivemilling industries and a tahini factory, all of which use the river to dump waste. The river, which only flows with fresh water in the winter after the rains, had become a sewage channel during the rest of the year. The team prepared a plan and the Israeli officials got funding from the German Ministry for Regional Development (BMZ) and the German Regional Bank



Before 1996

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for Development (KFW). The Germans also agreed to act as facilitator, running the meetings and helping to clarify the roles of Israelis and Palestinians at every phase of the plan.

"This allowed our collaboration to be completely equal," said Brandeis. "It wasn't Israelis inviting Palestinians to the table, but all of us sitting down to a shared table, with the Germans taking the role of hosts." All participants spoke only English, a neutral language, to further equalize the partnership. Leaving politics strictly aside was the key to fruitful collaboration, according to Brandeis. Some meeting days occurred right after a Palestinian suicide bombing attack, or during the siege of Tul Karem by the Israeli Defense Forces.

"We talked only sewage," said Brandeis. "Interpersonally, we had no problems. We developed genuine friendship and respect on both sides. And with email and cell phones, we were able to communicate easily."

While German engineers prepared feasibility studies, Palestinian and Israeli neighbors were fighting a common enemy: mosquitoes. They were breeding in the sewage posing a health threat because of West Nile disease and others. "During the intifada, we had unofficial cease fires so a contractor could spray the mosquitoes on both sides of the border," said Brandeis. "This was only one example of the many instances of cooperation between the neighbors.

Before any work was started on the Palestinian side of the river, the Israelis implemented an emergency project downriver to build a treatment facility, scrubbed the banks of the river clean and created seven river parks. The security fence had not yet been constructed, and working so close to Palestinian areas should have been dangerous for the Israelis. "Bullets were fired at the village 200 meters north, and at the Israeli soldiers a few hundred meters south," said Brandeis. "They could have easily shot us, but they knew that every Monday at 9 in the morning, the Israeli Jewish managers for the project met there, and they never shot one bullet at us."

For Brandeis, the Alexander River Project collaboration proves that it is possible for neighbors to learn to live together and

solve their problems together. "The huge majority of our friends and family on both sides of the fence just want to live in peace and have a normal life and a better standard of living. Most of us are not extremists. But in the political climate we've been experiencing, ordinary people can't influence larger government policies. That's the tragedy of ordinary people."

In the summer of 2003, the first phase of the joint plan began with the rebuilding of the sewage ponds in Tul Karem. A German engineering firm did the planning, the Palestinian contractors did the building, and the Israeli partners helped with security and logistics, including aiding in the transport of workers who lived in Gaza and who had to pass through Israeli security checkpoints, and helping to get clearance to bring in supplies such as pipes.

The project will continue with dealing with pollution control from industry. Brandeis says he has a dream for the next phase, which is to create a Peace Park on both sides of the river by diverting the sewage upstream and creating a place where Israeli children and Palestinian children can play on the riverbanks. There is a security wall dividing the riverbanks right now, "but it won't be there forever," says Brandeis. "For now, the children will have to play on their own sides, but some day they will play together."

The Israeli-Palestinian collaboration is one important piece of the Alexander River Restoration Project, which was launched by the Alexander River Restoration Administration in Israel, funded by the Jewish National Fund (JNF), a leading environmental NGO represented in Spain, the U.S. and many other countries; Israel's Ministry of the Environment; and local and regional council and drainage authority. In the scope of this project, seven public parks were developed, and local flora and fauna were restored, including an endangered species of large, fresh-water turtles.

For their comprehensive and transdisciplinary restoration project, the Alexander River Restoration Administration was awarded the prestigious International River Prize in 2003 in Brisbane, Australia.