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Israel Eco

BRIAN SCHULTZ

It is not uncommon to have an Israeli guide point out to a tour group that the modern State of Israel has caused the desert to bloom. The inference is to the biblical prophecies concerning Israel's restoration, in which God promises to bring life (i.e. vegetation) to its wastelands, especially Isaiah35:1-2 (but see also 41:18-19; 51:3; etc.). Practically speaking, the guide's statement is in reference Israel's Negev, its southern great wilderness, which Israel has been able to harness for agricultural purposes by using modern irrigation techniques. Whether or not the guide (or hearers) actually believes the modern state of Israel is in fact fulfilling such prophecies is another matter. But it is illustrative of the way Jews returning to their ancestral land have ingeniously harnessed Palestine's wastelands for agricultural and commercial purposes. Another example is Israel's famous Jaffa oranges, grown on what used to be the swamplands of the Sharon Plain.

While Israel can boast of many such success stories, not all it has undertaken has produced such positive results. One example is the former marshes of the Huleh Bassin north of the Sea of Galilee, which have been drained to provide extra farm land. A volcanic outcrop used to act as a natural dam to the Jordan River as it flows toward the Sea of Galilee. The backing up of the waters not only caused the marshes, but even a lake that can be seen on pre-1950's maps of Palestine and Israel. To drain the land, a channel was cut through the rocky outcrop, thereby permitting the water to flow unhindered. Unfortunately, it revealed that the marshy land was nothing more than peat—basically useless for agricultural purposes unless heavily fertilized. The problem is, excess fertilizer now drains into the Jordan River, and eventually into the Sea of Galilee, Israel's primary source of drinking water. This has resulted in the need for even more water treatment before it can be channeled to homes across the country as drinking water. To make matters worse, it was also discovered that when the Jordan River had to slowly make its way through the porous volcanic rock, the latter acted as a filter. Now that a new channel has been cut, nature's filtering system is no longer cleaning the Jordan River, only compounding the need for water treatment.

Another more serious problem is brewing on the other side of the Sea of Galilee. Because the sea is Israel's main drinking water source, its exit has been damned to preserve as much of the winter runoff as possible. This has,

of course, reduced the Jordan River to little more than a small creek flowing toward the Dead Sea. Floods like the one described in the book of Joshua have not been seen for a half-century. This damning of the Sea of Galilee has contributed to a new phenomenon: the lowering of the Dead Sea. During the last decade, the drop has averaged over a meter (a meter being just over a yard) a year! The lack of incoming water is compounded by an increased rate of evaporation: because the minerals in the Dead Sea water are valuable from a commercial perspective, both Jordan and Israel are artificially speeding up the rate of evaporation in salt pools for the purpose of collecting the minerals left behind. This too has only worsened the drop in the sea's level. What no one could predict is that the newly exposed shores are eventually being gradually and increasingly pockmarked by hundreds of sinkholes that appear without warning. Worse than the eyesore this has created, it has tragically caused the deaths of a few hikers/bathers who were so unfortunate as to have the earth suddenly open up underneath them and be left stranded without any way of climbing out or calling for help. More recently, there is even talk that the receding shore line is causing the erosion of the foundations of all the buildings at the holiday spa resort of En Boqeq at the southern end of the Dead Sea. Doomsday scenarios predict that all the luxury hotels may be compromised before the end of the next decade. Because of these and other issues relating to the Dead Sea, the idea of siphoning water from the Red Sea into the Dead Sea is seeing new life, though to date there are still no concrete plans to implement it.

In light of such brewing ecological disasters, it must be noted that Israel has also turned some of its 'bad scenarios' into models worth emulating by other nations needing to find environmental solutions. Tel Aviv's main garbage dump, which in fifty years grew to over two hundred feet high and a mile long, had become a serious environmental threat. Of more immediate danger were the scores of birds it attracted and that had become a serious safety concern for the commercial planes flying in and out of Israel's nearby Ben-Gurion Airport. Today, not only has the dump been revamped into a major center for recycling, even producing energy from the harmful gases it emits rather than allowing them to dissipate into the atmosphere, but the dump itself is being completely transformed and incorporated as the main element of, most surprisingly, a nature park. Though the project is not yet completed, it is already open to the public.