

Crossing boundaries for the environment

June 22 2016, by Tiff Van Huysen, Earth Institute, Columbia University



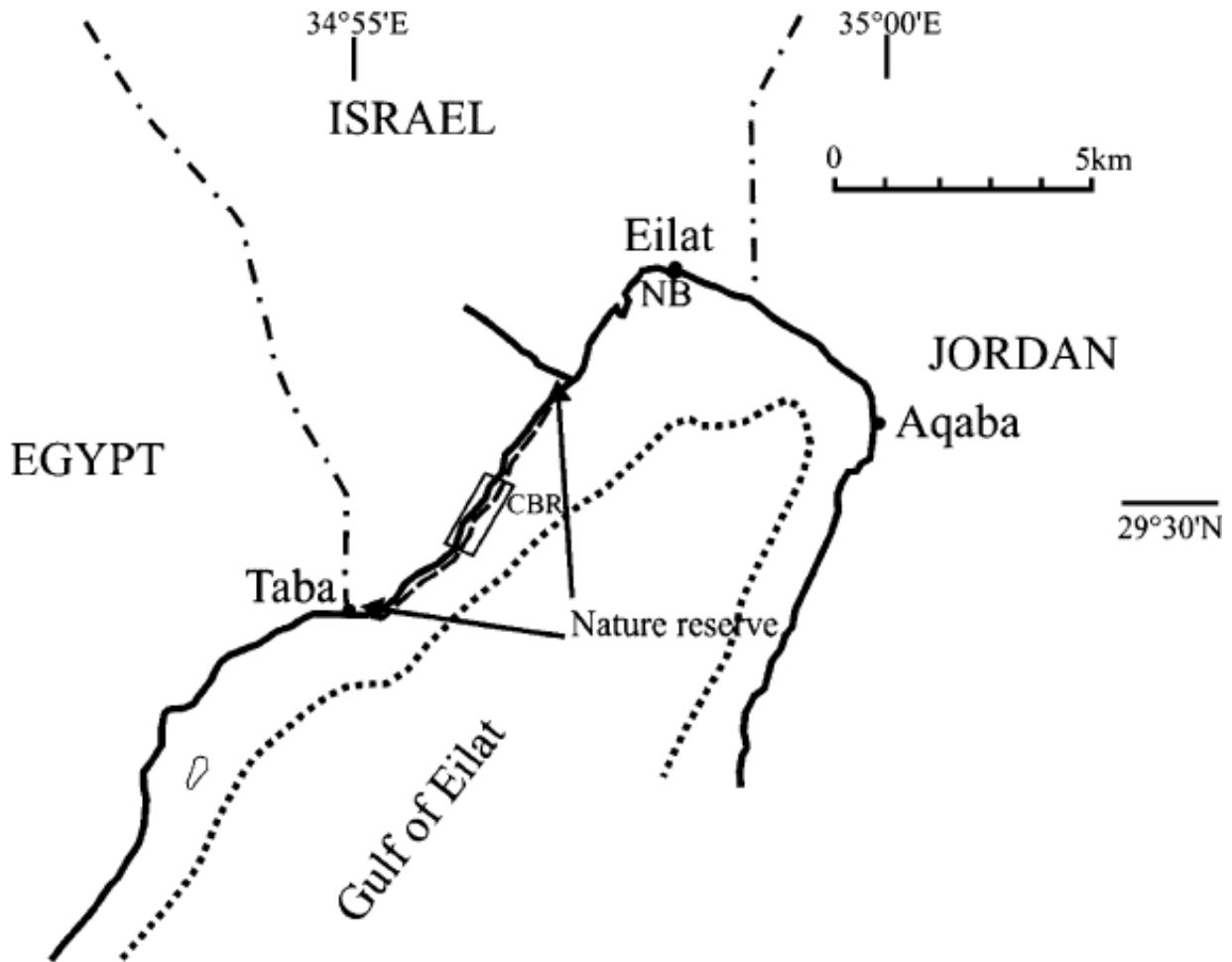
Credit: NOAA

In the Gulf of Aqaba (Eilat), the waves are predictable. The prevailing winds are from the north and the water is calm and clear whether it laps at the shores of Jordan or Israel. This attribute, according to a marine scientist, makes it easy to plan a trip to conduct research in the gulf. If a scientist or student wants to conduct research two years from now, it is likely that the waters will be calm and clear and suitable for collecting data by boat.

But while the waters in the gulf may be predictably peaceful (and lovely to swim in), the regional political situation is less so, with waves of tension that oscillate around a status quo of tenuous peace or intractable conflict. Thus, two years from now, the shape of the political wave may facilitate unencumbered, collaborative, cross-border research and data collection. Or, sovereignty and perceptions of security may drive a shift in the political winds that render the scientific waters unsuitable for synchronized swimming depending, perhaps, on your identity and the borders that define it.

The discussion of borders, whether physical, political, or psychological, was inherent to the two-week fieldwork course on regional environmental sustainability in the Middle East. The idea that nature is borderless and can thus serve as a model for transboundary natural resource management surfaced multiple times.

However, as someone who has studied ecology, I disagree with the concept that nature is borderless, and I think it is important to remember that nature subscribes to its own boundaries, rather than the political or social boundaries we demarcate for ourselves. The boundaries in nature are governed by biology, chemistry and physics. This is why we have forests, grasslands, deserts, and oceans, and why we speak of ecosystems and of the earth and sky.



General map of the northern Gulf of Eilat, Red Sea (NB = North beach; CBR = Coral Beach Reserve). Map from B. Rinkevich / J. Exp. Mar. Biol. Ecol. 327 (2005).

These boundaries can be and are transcended such that systems (e.g., terrestrial, ocean, climate) are coupled and functionally interdependent. That is, even though we classify and often study these systems as separate units, in reality they do not operate in isolation, and their interactions are spatially and temporally dynamic. Thus, it is not the concept of a borderless nature that should serve as a model to facilitate cross-border dialogue and cooperation. Rather, it is that nature's systems

are interconnected and their borders are open to exchange.

Throughout the course, it was evident that there is not a lack of scientific or social will to engage in transboundary cooperation, collaboration, and peacebuilding efforts. There are people, including scientists, on different sides of different borders open to exchanging information and sharing efforts to address environmental challenges that transcend [political boundaries](#). As scientists, we are taught to be unbiased and objective, and even to avoid engaging in advocacy early in our careers for fear of potential career-ending repercussions of advocating for a given point of view.

The scientists we met during this course demonstrated that when there is recognition of a shared goal, whether it is treating an oil spill in the Gulf or establishing the Red Sea Marine Peace Park, it is possible to engage in cross-border collaborative efforts where objectivity can, over time, dissolve biases and psychological barriers to cooperation that are born out of national identities and narratives. While scientific collaboration has become more challenging in this region during the last decade, the hope is that cross-border cooperation will continue and not be limited to scientific endeavors.



Credit: Columbia University

However, it is evident that this will to cooperate does not, currently, permeate political endeavors or the upper echelons of bureaucracy. The emergence of a political will to cooperate and collaborate is suppressed by perceived needs to establish or maintain both sovereignty and security.

Herein lies a tension between two wills that challenges open, cross-border collaboration. When speaking of cross-border collaboration, a dear friend of mine, one whose life and the lives of those she loves is colored by the various hues of an enduring political conflict, wishes to "put it in the sun" and for those engaging in such collaboration to be able to claim their nationality without fear of political or social backlash. However, she has also discussed the reluctance to challenge the status quo of a cyclical conflict because it is too dangerous to do so.

There is no SPF for the type of exposure that may come with putting such collaboration in the full light of the regional sun. Thus, the desire to "put it in the sun" is eclipsed by the danger of challenging the status quo and we do what we can do, in the shadows of conflict, by tapping into the place in each of us where hope and courage reside.

This story is republished courtesy of Earth Institute, Columbia University: blogs.ei.columbia.edu/ .

Provided by Earth Institute, Columbia University

Citation: Crossing boundaries for the environment (2016, June 22) retrieved 19 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2016-06-boundaries-environment.html>

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