

Environmental peace building in the Middle East

June 27 2016, by James Larson, Earth Institute, Columbia University



View of the proposed Jordan River Peace Park from Naharayim. Credit: Columbia University

This year's regional environmental sustainability course took us to a collection of sites and locations that brought up the environmental and political issues facing the Middle East. One major focus of our trip was on how collective environmental objectives can be used as tools and solutions for building a larger peace between Israel, Jordan and Palestine.

Throughout our time in Jordan, we visited (and were prohibited from visiting) several sites that had a profound impact on the way I see the environment and understand my impact on it. Our first stop was at the Sharhabil Bin Hasnah Eco Park, where Friends of the Earth Middle East–Eco Peace has established a nature reserve and tourist attraction to educate people about environmental sustainability and conservation in the Jordan valley.

The director of the park spoke about the importance of both environmental conservation and collaboration with other countries in the region. He spoke to us about collaboration on [environmental issues](#) as a key component to building and fostering a stable and peaceful Middle East.

There was an interesting moment in which he described the fact that Jordanians and Israelis had to collaborate with one another as a reluctant obligation. It stood out to me because it revealed in a very plain sense the depth of the obstacles they face.

On one hand, he was speaking to how difficult collaboration is between the countries, given generations of mistrust and violence. On the other hand, he was speaking to how powerful the environment can be for creating a new regional identity that is based on collaboration and cooperation. In a region where these two words are hard to come by, it speaks volumes that dedicated individuals are biting their tongues for the sake of environmental protection and sustainability.



A painting at the Sharhabil Bin Hasnah Eco Park. Credit: Columbia University

The next part of our tour provided an excellent example of the challenges people working toward environmental peace-building in Israel, Jordan and Palestine face: a site that we were unable to visit. Al-Baqoura, the Jordanian side of a proposed peace park with Israel, was on our itinerary and a place that I was extremely excited to visit. The Jordan River Peace Park is a proposed park that would also be operated by Friends of the Earth Middle East–EcoPeace, and bring together Naharayim on the Israeli side and Al-Baqoura on the Jordanian side as a place for [environmental conservation](#) and ecotourism. It is perhaps the best example we had of what environmental peace building can and does look like in Jordan and Israel.

Unfortunately, at the last minute our permit to visit the site from the Jordanian side was pulled for reasons beyond our control. It was a frustrating moment. The fact that we were all there to learn about peace-building and the environment and yet were barred from entering one of the few sites that would incorporate both was another reminder of how difficult it can be to gain positive momentum for NGOs and civil service organizations.

Traveling throughout Jordan and Israel, it became clear to me how important the environment is to human sustainability, but also to making progress toward sustainable peace. Environmental issues can be seen as joint threats to any given number of actors in a region, and for this reason, managing these threats offers itself to collaboration. For sustainable [peace](#) between Israel, Jordan and Palestine, the environment and its protection must be used as a catalyst for [collaboration](#).

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