

# Shrinking Sea of Galilee has some hoping for a miracle

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The Sea of Galilee has been shrinking for years, leading to the appearance of sandy spots at the water's edge

It was not so long ago when swimmers at Ein Gev would lay out their towels in the grass at the edge of the Sea of Galilee.

Today, they put up their parasols 100 metres (yards) further down, on a sandy beach that has appeared due to the shrinking of the iconic body of [water](#).

"Every time we come we feel an ache in our hearts," said Yael Lichi, 47, who has been visiting the famous [lake](#) with her family for 15 years.

"The lake is a symbol in Israel. Whenever there is a drought, it is the first thing we talk about."

In front of Lichi, wooden boats with Christian pilgrims aboard navigate the calm waters, among groups from across the world that visit.

The Sea of Galilee, where Christians believe Jesus walked on water, has been shrinking for years, mainly due to overuse, and environmentalists are raising the alarm.

Plans are being devised to resuscitate the freshwater body known to Israelis as the Kinneret and to some as Lake Tiberias.

For Israel, the lake is vital, having long been the country's main source of water. Israeli newspaper Haaretz provides its water level daily on its back page.

Its shrinking has been a source of deep concern. When two islands appeared recently due to falling water levels, it received widespread attention in the Israeli media.



Believed by Christians to be where Jesus walked on water, the Sea of Galilee has been shrinking mainly due to overuse

Since 2013 "we are below the low red line" beyond which "salinity rises, fish have difficulty surviving and vegetation is affected," said Amir Givati, hydrologist at Israel's water authority.

The level is only around 20 centimetres (less than eight inches) above the record low plumbed in 2001—except, at that time, 400 million cubic metres (14.1 billion cubic feet) a year were pumped out for irrigation.

"This year, we only pumped 20 million cubic metres, but the lake is in a very bad state," said Givati.

Added to that is the 50 million cubic metres Israel sends to neighbouring Jordan as part of peace agreements.

## **'Valley of bananas'**

Its unique characteristics go beyond its religious significance.



Environmentalists have raised the alarm and plans are being drawn up to resuscitate the freshwater lake

It is 200 metres (650 feet) below sea level, located north of the Dead

Sea, the River Jordan between them.

Both the Dead Sea and the Jordan have also suffered from overuse.

The Galilee covers some 160 square kilometres (60 square miles), roughly the size of Liechtenstein.

At the water ministry, blame for its condition is placed on five years of drought.

But "climatic factors alone are inadequate to explain the record shrinkage of the Sea of Galilee," wrote Michael Wine, Alon Rimmer and Jonathan Laronne, researchers at Israel's Ben Gurion University.

Irrigated agriculture, pumping and diversions are the main culprits, they say in an analysis.





Israel's water authority blames the Sea of Galilee's condition on five years of drought

Israel constructed a national aqueduct in the 1950s in the years after the country's birth, when it was on a quest for nation-building and sought to "make the desert bloom", as its early pioneers put it.

The aqueduct carried water from the lake towards the rest of the country.

"Lake Tiberias was used as a national reservoir," said Julie Trottier, a professor who specialises in Israeli-Palestinian water issues.

A man-made canal supplied water to the west towards the Mediterranean

coast and into the Negev desert in the south, she said.

That system has not been in place for some 10 years. Now, most homes in the west of the country use desalinated water from the Mediterranean, while farms are irrigated with water that is treated and recycled.

But eastern Israel does not have access to desalinated water, said Orit Skutelsky, of the Society for the Protection of Nature in Israel.

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