

The Alexander River Restoration Project **Cross-Border Cooperation Between Emek Hefer and Tul Karem**

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The Alexander River Restoration Project**

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The Alexander River is one of the largest and most beautiful rivers in central Israel. The river originates in the Samarian Hills. Over the last fifty years, the river has suffered from severe pollution and has consequently become a channel for the conveyance of sewage and effluent. Its banks have been destroyed and the natural flora and fauna have almost totally disappeared. In 1994, the Alexander River Restoration Administration was founded, headed by Mr. Nahum Itzkovitz, Mayor of the Emek Hefer Regional Council. In a joint effort, comprising about 25 entities, the river restoration process was commenced and it was successful in removing most of the pollutants. Seven parks were developed along the river, outline plans were prepared, the general public was involved and ecological projects were carried out, among other action.

From its outset, this project has been led by the Emek Hefer Regional Council, the Ministry of the Environment, the Jewish National Fund (JNK-KKL) and the Sharon Drainage Authority. Architect Amos Brandeis has been the Project Manager and Chief Planner of the Alexander River Restoration Project since its inception.

The two main sources of pollution of the river are the Nablus Stream (Zaymar Vadi) and the sewage of the town of Tul Karem. Both are in the Palestinian territories. The main tributary of the Alexander River is the Nablus Stream, into which millions of cubic meters of sewage are discharged from about seventy sources of pollution along the stream - towns, villages, industrial plants, garages, stone mills, garbage dumps, etc. For two months a year, during the olive-picking season, the waste from the olive mills along the river are discharged into it: the river turns black and the fish residing in the river die.

The sewage of the town of Tul Karem used to be treated, in part, in the municipal sewage ponds. It flowed freely into another tributary of the Alexander River. The sewage of the Alexander River and the sewage from the sewage ponds of Tul Karem flows under the separation fence that has been built along the Green Line, thus polluting the Alexander River and the entire surrounding area. Severe environmental damage has been caused to the groundwater used by Israelis and Palestinians alike, and the open sewage causes diseases and the development of mosquitoes which, in this region, can also spread the West Nile Virus.

In 1996, courageous local leaders, on both sides, from Tul Karem and Emek Hefer, already understood that the acute environmental problem was causing severe damage to the environment and to the quality of life of all the residents in the region. The leaders also understood that this important environmental issue, which knows no geopolitical borders, could serve as a basis for collaboration between Israeli and Palestinian neighbours. Such collaboration is an example of peaceful co-existence, with a genuine and true concern for the residents whom the local leaders represent. The mutual trust that was created, as a result of the initiative of Mr. Nahum Itzkovitz, Mayor of the Emek Hefer Regional Council, was the basis for the collaboration which has continued, without interruption, since 1996, between Emek Hefer and Tul Karem. Two cooperation agreements have been signed, a joint plan has been prepared by the professional planning teams and many meetings have been held.

In 1998, the German government (BMZ ministry) decided, through the KFW and the GTZ, to support and assist the advancement of this unique and challenging project. Thanks to the professional and financial assistance of the German government, in conjunction with the excellent collaboration

between Tul Karem, Emek Hefer and the German representatives, professional teams and consultants, the first stage of work of the joint project was completed in February 2005. This stage included the rehabilitation of the sewage ponds of Tul Karem, the rebuilding of these ponds, the installation of new pipes connecting the town of Tul Karem to the ponds and new pipes connecting the ponds to the "Emergency Project for the Sewage of the Nablus Stream", which was set up on the Israeli side, next to Kibbutz Yad Hannah.

The works on the Tul Karem side were implemented by a Palestinian contractor, selected through a tender process. On the Israeli side, with Israeli financing, the "Emergency Project for the Sewage of the Nablus Stream" was set up, which is a wastewater treatment plant to treat the sewage that crosses the Green Line in the Nablus Stream channel, as well as the sewage that has recently started to be discharged from the restored sewage ponds of Tul Karem. This plant contains technologies for the treatment of the unique sewage, which is one of a kind even on an international scale, in terms of its complexity, diversity and the concentration levels of the various pollutants in it.

The unique collaboration which has been achieved between Emek Hefer and Tul Karem, during several years of dialogue and during one year of actual works for the implementation of Stage A, serves as a basis for hope for normal co-existence on both sides of the Green Line. Additional stages for the implementation of the project are planned for performance in the coming years. These are being discussed by the Palestinian, Israeli and German teams. The remaining question in this regard is: Can this project be an example for a better future in the Middle East?

The project has won the prestigious 2003 International Thiess Riverprize (Brisbane, Australia). The International Riverfoundation, based in Brisbane, encourages twinning projects between the annual winners of the prize and developing countries. First steps of a twinning project between the Alexander River Restoration Administration and the Government of Burkina Faso in Western Africa have been made, regarding saving Lake Bam. The lake, which is in severe danger of drying up, provides the water supply of about 100,000 people that live in this poor land. A real difference can be made there if sufficient international funds will be available to continue the next stages of the project.