

NEIGHBORS PATH'S **Background and Introduction**

For thousands of years, water resources have been the basis for economic development in the Middle East region and their natural beauty has been a source of religious and cultural inspiration for many civilizations. Thus, for example, the Dead Sea Basin and the Jordan River Valley are areas rich in natural and cultural sites that are valued the world over and are significant to the three monotheistic religions.

Today, however, many of the region's water sources and the eco-systems they support are at risk of irreversible degradation. Unsustainable development patterns in the past, massive water diversion and uncoordinated planning between Israeli, Jordanian and Palestinian governmental authorities, have all contributed to this present state of demise. Despite the undeniable potential for ecotourism and rural tourism development in the region, mismanagement of the regional water sources has in fact restricted social and economic opportunities for local communities.

"Ecotourism means responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the well-being of local people". In line with this definition by The International Ecotourism society, FoEME supports tourism development that is based on caring for the environment, and promotes a policy of integrated sustainable tourism planning and the adoption of natural conservation models (i.e. Biosphere Reserve).

The 17 **Neighbors' Paths** are all community-based tours that deal with the issue of water and peace building between Israeli, Jordanian and Palestinian neighboring communities which share a common water source (i.e. a stream, river or an aquifer). The concept of a Neighbors' Path has been designed to achieve a synergetic effect of sustainable development and grassroots peace building.

The paths take their visitors through the water history and into the water reality of local communities, providing a view and an insight into their neighbors' lives as well. These paths, trails and tours showcase the mutual dependence on shared water resources and highlight the need for cross-border cooperation in protecting those resources.

The existing regional blend of natural and cultural heritage taken together with environmental issues comprises a compelling platform for an alternative tourism experience. The trails highlight the rich history found in the region but also reveal degradation and pollution, often 'not seen' by local residents themselves and certainly not usually shown to tourists. Moreover, planned in cooperation with local communities, these paths are aimed at leveraging the untapped potential of rural eco-tourism development. The paths incorporate local knowledge and at the same time aim to involve local residents in guiding the tours.

In many of our communities, tourism is an undeveloped sector today. By identifying and creating opportunities for local tourist enterprises, the project helps to generate and diversify income for local communities. For example: the visitors are invited to visit shops, restaurants, home hospitality and other attractions in the community. At the same time we teach local residents environmentally friendly practices and provide incentives to businesses which are committed to the process" (Says Michal Sagive, the Israeli coordinator of the "Good water Neighbors" project)

The Neighbors' Path is therefore a driving force for rural economic re-generation and for regional sustainable development.