

Jerusalem's Gazelle Valley Park: An Urban Oasis by Jay Shofet

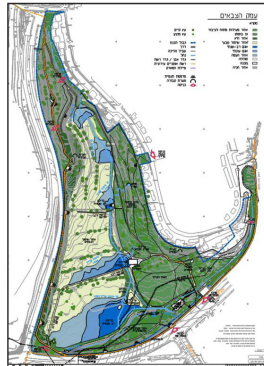
IN 2008, AS THE JERUSALEM PLANNING Committee was approving the establishment of a uniquely conceived urban wildlife park in the city, Jewish National Fund entered into a partnership with the American affiliate of the Society for the Protection of Nature in Israel (SPNI), Israel's oldest, largest, and leading environmental NGO. One of the initial and now high-profile beneficiaries of this cooperation was the development of Jerusalem's Gazelle Valley Park, Israel's first and most innovative urban wildlife reserve. Both SPNI, which spearheaded the park's creation, and JNF, which supported its crucial planning process, played significant roles preserving this land for future generations, creating one of Israel's most exciting new attractions.

The Gazelle Valley was geographically part of the Jerusalem forest, and as far back as the Davidic era was an important orchard for ancient Jerusalem. Even in modern times it was a key source of food, helping feed Jerusalem during the siege following the 1948 War of Independence.

In the late 1980s, the valley was cut off from the rest of the Jerusalem hills by the Begin motorway, isolating a herd of 30 mountain gazelles (from which the valley gets its name). By the early 1990s, real estate developers began to pressure the municipality to permit high-rise buildings on the land, which would have destroyed the habitat of the endangered gazelles and removed one of the city's last remaining open greenspaces. Opposition

to this development was led by residents, activists and ecologists from the Jerusalem branch of SPNI in coalition with grassroots neighborhood groups.

Amir Balaban, SPNI's director of Urban Nature and a familiar face on Israeli television nature programs, recognized that this open space had to offer something to all Jerusalemites. Amir and the SPNI Jerusalem community worked with local residents to create a plan to transform the Gazelle Valley into a world-class urban nature asset, and JNF's timely support allowed the planning to kick into high gear.



The park will officially open in mid-2015 and the next stage is the construction of a state-of-the-art visitor center. Over time, new gazelles will be introduced into the valley to replenish the herd, and a fence has been built to protect the gazelles from predators, including jackals and feral dogs. Visitors will be able to explore the valley along newly laid, accessible paths with strategic observation points. Fulfilling residents' request that the park feature a water source, a system of artificial ponds was created to manage water runoff and feed a large central pond.



A beneficial addition to the Jerusalem landscape, it has become a magnet for migrating birds. New cherry and apple trees, along with other culturally significant vegetation, have been replanted, paying tribute to the valley's former role as Jerusalem's fruit basket.

SPNI's work in the field of urban nature combines modern technology and ancient techniques to create a network of urban biodiversity sites. Imagine artificial salt marshes in Haifa, seasonal wetlands in Herzliya, a snorkel park in the sea off Bat Yam, a living pier at the Jaffa Port, and green roofs everywhere. With support from JNF and its donors, SPNI is harnessing the power of nature for sustainable development and helping to preserve Israel's biodiversity. ■

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