Negotiating the Negev

The coexistence of development, preservation and growth
By Melissa Gerr

David Ben-Gurion’s vision was to make the Negev desert bloom, but Israel’s efforts to develop the arid lands of its southern interior often pit environmentalists against government land officials, and native Bedouin tribes against an influx of immigrants and longtime Israeli urban-dwellers.

Only 8 percent of Israel’s population lives in the vast Negev region, an area that comprises about 60 percent of the nation’s landmass. Agriculturally, the country can produce about 45 percent of its calories, while the larger percentage of food is imported, said Alon Tal, associate professor at Ben-Gurion University of the Negev Institute for Dryland Environmental and Energy Research in Be’er Sheva. He thinks Israel could do better — such as by growing food in the Negev — but, he urges, not at the price of environmental destruction.

“We need innovative agriculture,” not government subsidies to bring in “one Jewish family... so they can hire 40 Thai workers. I don’t think this is in the national interest,” said Tal, who sits on the international board of the Jewish National Fund/Keren Kayemet LeIsrael. He believes non-profit foundation and government subsidies should focus on “solar industries and clean tech and biotech and make [the Negev] a place to be.”

Wadi Attir, a unique sustainable agriculture project that addresses Tal’s urging, celebrated its dedication ceremony Jan. 27 in the Bedouin village of Hura, north of Be’er Sheva. Initiated at the end of 2007 and estimated to be a $10 million project once fully realized, it is a collaboration of Dr. Michael Ben-Eli’s New York-based Sustainability Laboratory and Hura Mayor Dr. Mohammed Alnabari.

Ben-Eli, a 20-year veteran of sustainability research and advocacy, found himself drawn to the region’s 180,000 Bedouin residents during a visit to the Ben-Gurion University of the Negev Blaustein Institute for Desert Research.

“My God, this is impossible,” he recalled saying, during a trip through some villages, “that Israeli citizens live in such conditions.”

Alnabari said the average age is 14 in the Bedouin community, and more than 60 percent are under 18. The Bedouin have lived a very simple and stable life, he explained, but now they feel they’ve lost everything, as a highly technological
Life encroaches on them. They need to learn methods to bridge those worlds, he said.

Interested in applying sustainability practices to help improve Bedouin living conditions, Ben-Eli met with Alnabari and others in Hura on a subsequent trip as well as researchers at the university. Seed funding from private donors allowed them to proceed.

“We were able to assemble a very unusual group of partners,” namely the Israeli government, academia, NGOs, the Jewish National Fund and private donors.

Wadi Attir fuses traditional Bedouin agricultural and husbandry practices with the pioneering and inventive agriculture methods presented by Ben-Eli’s team. The staff learns techniques for soil enhancement and water retention and can receive training for eventual employment. They maintain the herds and crops and produce dairy products, medicinal herbas and cosmetic goods.

 “[Wadi Attir] is a big opportunity,” said Alnabari, “with many resources for the future.”

Situated in a semi-arid region, the teams were charged with the sizable task of enriching the soil.

Stefan Leu, a scientist at Blaustein Institute for Desert Research, said in the Negev region “the soil productivity and fertility is about 10 times less than it could be” and he is working to replenish it after its destruction “thousands of years ago by early settlers and passing armies. The problem is the restoration of this vegetation; getting it all back is a very slow process.”

Echoing Bedouin farming practices, Leu recommended planting native trees such as olive, acacia, pistachio and carob that are useful as food as well as anchoring and nourishing the soil. He devised systems of augmenting the landscape with natural rain catches made of small earth mounds and also overlaying the soil with leaves and straw, all of which capture water and prevent it from being washed into gullies or ravines.

Leu admits restoration of vegetation can take years, though initial successes are taking root as he and his team make the soil more permeable. But, he said, there is an obstacle even more impenetrable.

“It is the nonexistent or ambiguous land ownership,” he said. Wadi Attir, after years of permit applications and negotiation, finally owns about 100 acres. “Every single other piece of land from this area from Be’er Sheva to Eilat and to Dimona … is not available because it’s under disputed ownership. Bedouins claim it is theirs, the government does not want to accept that claim, and, therefore, nothing can be done.”

But the collaboration of Wadi Attir has been encouraging, he noted, because it encompasses “sustainable development and also addresses economic, environmental and social problems” and it helps to ameliorate them within the Bedouin community. That holistic approach is a steadfast principle of Ben-Eli’s Sustainability Laboratory.

To date, staff at Wadi Attir has planted 3,500 olive trees, constructed animal pens for their goat

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Local women learn about planting and raising indigenous vegetables at Wadi Attir, a project that promotes sustainable agriculture in the Negev Desert.

and sheep herds and built a large barn. There is also a sophisticated combination solar- and wind-energy system that heats up stored power to augment its energy output. Plans include a visitors’ center, a milking facility, dairy operation and technology to convert waste into an energy resource. Ultimately, Ben-Eli said, the desire is to replicate the project in other desert regions around the world.

But agriculture is only part of the Negev’s evolution, with government planners seeing the region as a potential home for those seeking suburban, or more affordable, lifestyles.

It’s nearly impossible to look around anywhere in Israel and not see some development, power lines or a village, said Shahar Solar, head of the Environmental Planning and Green Building Division at the Israel Ministry of Environmental Protection.

“You can drive for days [in the U.S.] and the only thing you’ll see is the road. You see nothing,” Solar said, recalling a recent two-week cross-country drive during his stay as a Wexner Israel Fellow at Harvard. “And here we don’t have that. So we have to think really carefully how we develop Israel. And the planning system should be precise.”

Shahar said “people perceive the Negev as empty” so it attracts projects such as hazardous waste treatment plants and power facilities that, he admits, are needed, but the government also sees it as fertile ground for growing new communities. In the planning stage are 11 new villages, said Shahar, most are north and east of Be’er Sheva, and includes Kasif, a village designated for an ultra-Orthodox community just across the road from a Bedouin village.

He likened the new villages to suburbs, containing about 100 to 200 homes and offering lower taxes, so they tend to attract higher economic-level families. His hope is that he and his colleagues can prevent some of the projects from moving forward.

“We think the way to develop Israel is going to existing cities like Dimona, Yerucham, Be’er Sheva, Netivot, Sderot … and invest there.” He added, “Then more people will enjoy the investment, not [just] the small minority.”

Tal agrees.

“We’ve got to help people make their [existing] towns economic and social successes,” he asserted. “We don’t need to take the limited resources we have as a society and build expensive new infrastructures so that a group of privileged yuppies can have their own little garden community. Those days are gone; they should be gone if we were running this country responsibly, both in terms of our ecological responsibilities and in terms of our social responsibilities.”

Solar said it is not only suburban sprawl, but also the unrecognized, unauthorized Bedouin communities that create challenges for the design and implementation of responsible planning.

He explained the danger is, with many small communities spread so far apart, that infrastructure cannot be efficiently disseminated to allow access for basic needs such as educational and health facilities or even electrical power. For example, when long power lines are used, 4 percent of electricity is lost in the transmission.

“We have to deal with this issue … and on the way minimize [the Bedouin] impact on the environment. It’s a big issue.” He added, “The [Bedouin] people now live in insufficient conditions. It’s not a matter of religion, it’s because they live so spread out … There is very low density but the impact is there. They have roads and houses, tents, cattle, all the impact of a small village.”

Proposed plans would require Bedouin families from low-density areas to move to larger settlements in order to access the provided services. Solar said in addition to improving the living situation of the communities “the ecological system will benefit. It’s a very political issue.”

With all of the good intentions of planned development and nonprofits encouraging movement to the Negev, Solar said, making it a reality is a very different thing.

“There is no demand to live in the Negev, especially in the remote places,” he said. “We should increase the demand for cities like Be’er Sheva, which has huge potential. … We can’t spread the money, the attention, the energy, in all kinds of remote places which are not serving anyone.”

The Jewish National Fund, which owns of about 13 percent of the land in Israel, maintains a bird’s-eye view across many different desert developments that reach far south into the Negev region. Its Blueprint Negev initiative is comprehensive in that it works with new and established communities and promotes improvements in health care accessibility and agriculture as well as cleaning up, restoring and preserving areas of historic and natural beauty.

According to Eric Narrow, JNF Midatlantic senior campaign executive, his organization’s role “is to be the collaborator and a partner in resources and funding.”
JNF grants funds but also works to empower its partners, explained Narrow. "Our goal is to create a sustainable model for socioeconomic growth and prosperity."

Previous to Wadi Attir, JNF was not working directly with Bedouin communities but welcomed the opportunity to support and collaborate with the Sustainability Laboratory, an organization that mirrored its mission, said Narrow. "When you look at what our focus is, it's providing a future for Israel, so as the needs of the country changed, that changed the focus of what we were doing."

Since then JNF has implemented other programs focused on Bedouin communities.

Continuing with the spirit of collaboration and meshing with its desire to sustainably develop the southern Negev, JNF also partners with Arava Institute for Environmental Studies, near Eilat, where primarily Israeli, Jordanian and Palestinian students work with a cadre of international environmentalists on interdisciplinary research that centers on innovative environmental technologies.

Arava International Center for Agricultural Training (AICAT) is another JNF partner organization committed to sustainable development and education, located in the central Arava region.

"Now [the institute] hosts 1,200 students from more than a dozen countries that learn cutting-edge farming techniques they can bring back to their countries," Narrow said. "We also teach them about Israel."

One of the ways you can bridge cultures is through the shared struggle with land challenges, said Narrow, "So there becomes a shared interdependency. They go back [to their countries of origin] with a stronger knowledge of business and agriculture and a stronger knowledge of the Jewish people ... They are usually from countries that would not [typically] be inclined to work with us."

The Arava Institute, co-founded by Tal, exemplifies the innovative, collaborative thinking he promotes as necessary to responsibly foster growth in the Negev.

"I'm a powerful advocate for development of the Negev," said Tal, "But we have to do it right so we leave something for our children to be proud of. Because right now, in terms of intergenerational justice ecologically, Israel is failing. We are not leaving our children as healthy a land of Israel as that which we received. We need to do better. We owe them that." Jr

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**Focus on Bedouin Youth**

A New Dawn creates opportunity for young at-risk population

Jamal Alkimawi, 35, grew up in the Negev's largest Bedouin community of Rahat, just north of Be'er Sheva. Since his teen years, he's not been satisfied sitting on his laurels, instead, he has pushed "to enact real change" in his community.

At 16, he established a never-before-existing student council at his school and through that met students from around the country. That exposure widened his horizons, and he began to see the opportunities possible, he said. At that young age Alkimawi dedicated himself to activism for his community.

He earned a scholarship to McGill University in Montreal, completed a degree in social work and returned to Israel as an academic counselor at Ben-Gurion University of the Negev. Alkimawi quickly realized he couldn't "just be in a nice office, at a university."

"I needed to get back to the ground," he said. "I can't sit on the [sidelines] and say things will move by themselves."

Alkimawi also became a father.

"You care about your kids, you don't want them to have the same challenges, you want to break the cycle," he said. "This drives me so much."

In 2009, he and several Bedouin and Jewish colleagues founded A New Dawn in the Negev, for which he is director. A New Dawn provides academic and cultural education and international exposure for about 600 Bedouin youths from ages 5 to 18. Programs range from after-school English instruction, a language exchange that includes German, English, Spanish, Chinese, Arabic and Hebrew, the Strings of Change Bedouin Youth Orchestra and a digital media center. Visiting graduate students from around the world also work with the youths.

Imminent approval by the Israeli government will enable the start of a scholarship program for A New Dawn's international student exchange, beginning with Germany.

"Change is always hard and is sometimes shunned, but we have been successful in the Bedouin communities for a few reasons," Alkimawi said. The main reason is the large demand for youth programming, previously nonexistent. The programs stand out because they are "social services for Bedouins by Bedouins," he added.

"A New Dawn is working to bring the Bedouin community to a higher standard ... in partnership with the surrounding society," he said, "to create a flourishing and blooming Negev."

— Melissa Gerr