The Society for the Protection of Nature in Israel (SPNI) – Israel’s oldest, largest and leading environmental organization – it starts with the protection of nature, but it doesn’t end there. 

Jay Shofet

Jewish tradition is clear in its insistence on moral stewardship of our natural environment. Our Bible prohibits the uprooting of fruit trees, progressively mandates a weekly day of rest for farm animals, and most dramatically, calls for a sabbatical year every seventh year for the land itself. This year, the “Shmita” year of allowing the land to lie fallow began at Rosh Hashanah, and provides an opportunity to rejuvenate not just the land, but our approach towards it.

Protecting Israel’s open spaces

The Society for the Protection of Nature in Israel (SPNI) was founded in 1953 by a small group of teachers, scientists and kibbutzniks as a response to the attempt to drain the entire Hula Valley wetlands. These early activists protested the short-sighted destruction of one of Israel’s most important natural habitats. Although the draining of the Hula swamps could not be stopped at the time, the Israeli government finally acknowledged the validity of the protesters’ claims 40 years later. In the mid-1990s, part of the Hula valley was re-flooded and returned to its original state, and today, as it has for millennia, the Hula serves as a crucial oasis for migrating birds. Each year, in addition to the birds, hundreds of thousands of nature enthusiasts from Israel and around the world visit the unique habitat, especially during the great bird migrations in the Spring and Fall.

More than 60 years after its founding, SPNI is a robust force blazing the trail for nature and the environment, working to protect Israel’s open spaces, coasts and beaches, and preserving its biodiversity. SPNI’s three pillars of activity – environmental protection, environmental education and eco-tourism – preserve the country’s natural resources for future generations. Some 90% of SPNI’s annual operating expenses come from Israeli sources, including support from the Ministries of Environmental Protection and Education, from fee-for-service activities of hiking and informal educational programs, and from tens of thousands of Israeli households, who pay annual membership dues and in addition donate generously to the organization. Hundreds of thousands of individuals participate in the organization’s myriad activities each year, including thousands of children, teens and young adults who regularly participate in nature, hiking and orienteering courses.

At the very heart of SPNI’s work is its Environmental Protection Department, spearheading the efforts to preserve Israel’s natural resources and unique landscapes. Since its launch, SPNI has known that it is most effective to work both ‘top down,’ with key decision-makers, and ‘bottom up’ – by setting in motion a tradition of citizen involvement aimed at protecting environmental assets against irresponsible development. SPNI has drawn together a stellar team of scientists, environmental watchdogs and advocates with expertise ranging from ecology to urban planning. This team campaigns, lobbies, researches and advocates for the protection of Israel’s open spaces, for biodiversity conservation, for preservation of rivers, winter ponds and coastlines, for sustainable development and clean energy, and ultimately for better quality of life for all citizens.

Environmental education

Responsible land use planning has always been key to SPNI’s achievements, and it has helped to create a more responsible planning culture in Israel. Its representatives sit on local, regional and national planning boards, working for best possible outcomes in planning decisions in both rural and urban areas. Over the last three decades, part of the Hula valley was re-flooded and returned to its original state, and today, as it has for millennia, the Hula serves as a crucial oasis for migrating birds. Each year, in addition to the birds, hundreds of thousands of nature enthusiasts from Israel and around the world visit the unique habitat, especially during the great bird migrations in the Spring and Fall.

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sixty years later, SPNI remains ever ready to continue the preservation of nature, flora and fauna, and heritage sites. The importance of SPNI is palpable when one tries to imagine what the country would have looked like if the organization did not exist, and did not struggle for the past 60 years for the environment, and for future generations. The importance of SPNI is about connecting Israelis from all walks of life to their natural heritage. SPNI’s Tourism Department offers eco-tourism experiences throughout the country, including day hikes on the over 9,000 miles of trails which SPNI is responsible for blazing, marking and maintaining. These pathways include the 627-mile Israel National Trail, and SPNI provides guided tours to hikers, birders and nature lovers throughout Israel for residents and eco-tourists from abroad. SPNI’s network of nine field schools throughout the country offers programs of hiking and informal education, as well as hospitality and overnight accommodations, for those who want to experience nature up close. One of SPNI’s greatest legacies has been the identification and designation of the lands that have become Israel’s extraordinary parks and reserves system, which led to the creation of the Israeli government’s Nature and Parks Authority. Another of SPNI’s earliest — and best-known — campaigns revolved around the protection of Israel’s wildflowers. Using a combination of legal means and educational measures, the organization managed to completely stop the widespread habit of flower picking — once and for all. This legendary campaign worked because it was based on environmental education for children; the children taught their parents, and Israel was transformed. This initiative has been widely studied in Israel and abroad, and led directly to the formation of SPNI’s Environmental Education division, which operates in hundreds of schools and dozens of local community environmental education centers across Israel today.

Whether developing and operating formal and extracurricular educational programs, organizing public campaigns, lobbying decision-makers, galvanizing citizens, or promoting alternative solutions to development plans, SPNI is at the forefront serving as the voice for the environment, and for future generations. The importance of SPNI is palpable when one tries to imagine what the country would have looked like if the organization did not exist, and did not struggle for the past 60 years for the preservation of nature, flora and fauna, and heritage sites. Sixty years later, SPNI remains ever ready to continue the struggle in new and innovative ways, instilling an eco-consciousness in Israeli culture, government and planning.

SPNI’s pioneering role in finding creative solutions has become critical. Preserving Israel’s fragile ecosystem has reached a degree of urgency that demands constant action. The range and the gravity of the issues have been increasing and the outcome of each of them has the potential to impact the future of the country for generations to come. SPNI’s board, staff and volunteers welcome the public’s involvement in their ongoing campaigns to protect Israel’s future, and invite everyone to experience Israel in its natural beauty.