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IT'S IN THEIR NATURE

For 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

Israel is for the birds

"Even the stork in the sky knows her appointed seasons, and the dove, the swift and the thrush observe the time of their migration" – Jeremiah 8:7

Israel is a bird watchers' paradise, with over a billion birds flying through Israel's skies on their great migrations each Spring and Fall. Over 2,500 years ago, according to Jewish tradition, the prophet Jeremiah was an avid birdwatcher, listing the birds in order of their annual appearances.

With SPNI's assistance, the Israeli government is investing in the creation of a national network of birding centers to transform Israel into an even more attractive world-class birding destination for international ornithologists and bird lovers. Over the next decade, 15 birding centers will be set up across the country, from the Hula Valley to Eilat. Each center will become a local hub for birding research, education, conservation and tourism – hosting over 1.5 million Israelis a year. The network will coordinate research and conservation projects across the entire country. This investment will help Israel tap into the multi-billion dollar bird-watching tourist industry, attracting an additional 70,000 tourists annually to Israel. SPNI has a long history of protecting birds and is established as the leading birding organization in Israel. Research conducted by former SPNI CEO Prof. Yossi Leshem reduced collisions between military aircraft and migrating birds by 76% over the past three decades, saving the lives of pilots and birds and over \$1 billion in material costs. An innovative and successful pilot project created cross-border friendships between Israeli, Palestinian and Jordanian farmers through the use of barn owls and kestrels as biological pest control. SPNI even organized the recent campaign to select Israel's national bird – the Hoopoe, a colorful, emblematic bird that can be found in all of Israel's varied habitats.



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

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◀ decade, SPNI has developed active urban communities in five of Israel's largest cities, for two main reasons: in recognition that urban nature too is a critical part of our natural heritage, and because dense, sustainable cities are the keys to preserving open spaces.

At the municipal and national levels, SPNI engages government ministries, city authorities and other regulators, through a variety of channels on the local and national levels to promote sustainable solutions for development challenges. The Mammal Department and the Israel Ornithological Center work to protect the variety of animal and bird species living in Israel, effecting local and global biodiversity. Together, these efforts create balance in future development and secure our environment.

SPNI's Education Department has succeeded in mainstreaming environmental education in the Israeli public school system. Each year, tens of thousands of children, youth and educators learn from the SPNI-developed sustainability curriculum in formal education settings. Many thousands of Israeli youth are engaged each year in summer camps, training programs and youth groups, studying and experiencing the variety of wildlife, the natural habitats and unique ecosystems in Israel, creating a lifelong bond with natural Israel. SPNI's education

programs, formal and informal, foster leaders for tomorrow who are connected and dedicated to their homeland and its precious natural legacy.

Eco-tourism experiences

Eco-tourism for 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 extra-curricular 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-conscience 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. ■

Historic anti-fracking victory

In September of this year, the Jerusalem Planning Committee announced their decision to forbid the Israel Energy Initiatives (IEI) company to conduct a pilot project of their fracking-like methods to extract the oil shale in the Elah Valley, in the Judean Foothills. This decision is without doubt one of the biggest victories for SPNI, and the environmental movement as a whole, in recent years. SPNI, together with local residents groups and environmental organizations, has worked for years to oppose the IEI's plan and prevent them from carrying out a highly experimental and potentially catastrophic pilot project that would have involved superheating the soil to extract the bottom-of-the-barrel fossil fuels – oil shale – that is produced.

Despite last minute pressure from the Prime Minister's Office to accept the plans, and lobbying from billionaire foreign backers of IEI, the Jerusalem Planning Committee voted 10-1 (with 2 abstentions) in favor of SPNI's arguments to nix the pilot and safeguard the future of one of Israel's largest and most important open spaces, ecological corridors and aquifers. The committee agreed that the potential rewards were not worth the huge risks to Israel's open spaces, clean air and potable water sources.

The Elah Valley was also the location for the historic battle between David and Goliath. It appears that history has repeated itself with the relatively tiny resources of SPNI, and Israel's other environmental NGO's, defeating the combined wealth and political influence of the IEI and its influential supporters.

Jay Shofet is Director of Partnerships and Development at The Society for Protection of Nature in Israel, and the former Executive Director of the Green Environment Fund.