



Biosphere Region on the Way



Treating municipal, industrial and agricultural waste



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Improving the environment and preserving open spaces



Catalyzing economic growth and national interests

A biosphere region is in the making in the Ramat Menashe region just south of the Lower Galilee

How to attain a sustainable balance between human and environmental needs? This is the classic dilemma, a major challenge, and there is no magic solution. One possible answer, currently advanced by the Regional Council of Megiddo in the Ramat Menashe region, is the establishment of a biosphere region (reserve) in the 18,000 hectare green lung between Haifa and Tel Aviv. According to "The Statutory Framework of the World Network of Biosphere Reserves" of UNESCO's Man and Biosphere Programme (MAB), biosphere reserves are created "to promote and demonstrate a balanced relationship between humans and the environment." This is what the plan for Ramat Menashe is all about.

Biosphere Reserves: Israel and Worldwide

- In the summer of 2006, there were 482 biosphere reserves in 102 countries within the framework of UNESCO's MAB program.
- In Israel, one biosphere reserve, Mt. Carmel was declared in 1996.
- Two more biosphere reserves are planned for Israel: in Ramat Menashe, south of the Lower Galilee and in the Judean Hills in the transition zone between the Mediterranean and desert biomes.

A Biosphere Region in the Making: The Case of Ramat Menashe

Recognition of the high landscape value of Ramat Menashe, a unique geographic entity between the Lower Galilee, the Jezreel Valley, the Umm-el Fahm mountains and the Mediterranean Sea, is not a new phenomenon. **In fact, all of Israel's national master plans, including the recently approved National Outline Plan for Building, Development and Conservation (National Plan 35) identify the region as an area with the very highest landscape sensitivity, designated for conservation.**

However, plans aside and reality aside. In recent years, the area has been subject to continuous threats – from infrastructure development, new cities and communities, a high-tension line of the Israel Electric Corporation, a solid waste disposal site, the Trans-Israel Highway, an industrial park, an employment center, and more. Stakeholders realized that if something is not done, amendments and easements to plans of all kinds could well change the unique rural character of the area. They decided not only to guard against these potential threats, but to do something positive – to come up with a set of rules for managing the area which would optimally balance between human needs and environmental needs.

A strategic plan for the Megiddo Regional Council, together with plans for a park spanning about half the area of the regional council, were the basis for advancing a biosphere region in the Ramat Menashe region. During the course of drafting the strategic plan for the regional council some six years ago, a process based on broad

Photos top to bottom:
Vineyards, wheatfields and oaks. Photo: Liron Shapira
Yokneam against backdrop of open space. Photo: Liron Shapira
Megiddo's green association cleans up. Photo: Na'ama Tessler

public participation, it was discovered that what united all stakeholders was the desire to preserve the special character of the open space in this region. Based on this, decisions were made about activities in different areas of life – from tourism to culture to development to environment. Most importantly, the strategic plan gave broad public backing for plans for an 8,400 hectare park within the jurisdiction of the council, which is populated by nearly 10,000 people living in 13 communities, mostly moshavim and kibbutzim.

Statutory Recognition for the Ramat Menashe Park

The Ramat Menashe park plan was initiated by the Regional Council of Megiddo, the Jewish National Fund, and by residents of the area themselves. The process of declaring about half of the area of the Regional Council of Megiddo as the Ramat Menashe Park, with a set of rules and regulations on planning and building, was crowned with success in June 2006. **The primary aim of the park, according to its planners, is to preserve the land unit in such a way as to assure the optimal coexistence of humans, flora and fauna and agriculture, on the one hand, and the preservation of the provincial atmosphere, rural intimacy and feeling of open spaces, on the other hand.**

The park itself is being developed as a unique forest reserve of both man-planted and natural Tabor oak woodlands (*Quercus ithaburensis*), mixed pine forests, cypress, open spaces, fields, orchards, springs and brooks. Some of the areas of the park are already protected by law as forests or nature reserves; others are designated for the development of tourism and recreation. The plan divides the park into regions with different levels of conservation/development, based on the carrying capacity of each area, such as nature reserves and their environs, areas designated for conservation, forests, agriculture, livestock pasture, rural open areas and rural settlement areas.

According to Shlomo Brand, the director of the Menashe region in the Jewish National Fund and the coordinator of the project, "the plan for the park doubles the areas which will be statutorily protected in comparison to the situation prior to the plan's approval. The plan will protect open spaces against government plans to establish new

communal settlements." The plan will ensure that all future development in the park area will be contiguous to existing building and "every plan will comply with environmental stipulations on the protection of open spaces and prevention of pollution, which were determined in the park plan."

Following the Biosphere Reserve Model

As one of the largest expanses of open space in Israel, including a wide diversity of natural assets alongside human settlements and agricultural areas, Ramat Menashe is an ideal candidate for the development of a biosphere region. Although efforts are currently invested in transforming the entire jurisdiction area of the Megiddo

Regional Council – some 18,000 hectares – into a biosphere region, the overall objective is to eventually include the entire geographic area of Ramat Menashe (which includes the town of Yokne'am and the Alona Regional Council) within one biosphere region. The hope is that the future will see a continuous open space in the area which will encompass the Ramat Menashe Park, the Alona Park to its west and the Carmel Park to the north.

In retrospect, the process initiated by the Megiddo Regional Council and by the Jewish National Fund unconsciously followed the concept of the biosphere reserve developed by UNESCO, both in terms of the different protection levels given to different areas (zones) of the park and in terms of the democratic process which was an integral part of the process. For the Megiddo Regional Council, the biosphere reserve model is guiding





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Hagit power plant. Photo: Liron Shapira



all development. According to Hanan Erez, mayor of the council, "the intention in Megiddo is to reach agreements through a process similar to mediation, which is based on the good will of all of the partners, rather than coercion from above by means of legislation or court sentences."

Master Plan for a Biosphere Region for the Megiddo Regional Council

Since 2005, a steering committee, composed of different stakeholders including members of the Megiddo Regional Council, the Jewish National Fund and representatives of grassroots and government organizations, has been working to advance UNESCO's declaration of the area as a biosphere region.

Today, a formal process is under way: preparation of a master plan for the development of a biosphere region in the Megiddo Regional Council. Its major objectives:

- To formulate policy and guidelines for planning the regional council as a biosphere region,

balancing between natural resource protection and response to human needs.

- To create wide public consensus about the council's vision for the year 2030 and to define the significance of the region as part of a biosphere region.

According to Joel Siegel, the strategic planner of the Megiddo Regional Council, the master plan for a biosphere region will result in four primary products:

1. Designation of land uses including maps.
2. Preparation of policy papers, based on a consensus building approach and on agreements between the political echelon,

professionals, communities and residents on issues as diverse as agriculture, infrastructure development, education and social and ecological justice.

3. Development of the necessary municipal frameworks to facilitate the flexible and dynamic advancement of the process.
4. Transformation of some of the plans into statutory plans and bylaws while allowing others to remain in the form of covenants and joint understandings.

Partnerships: At the Heart of the Plan

The process of formulating the plan toward a biosphere region is based on the forging of partnerships with all stakeholders. Today, partners include the Jewish National Fund, the Megiddo Regional Council, government ministries such as the Ministry of Environmental Protection, Interior, Agriculture, Tourism, Government Tourism Company, UNESCO's Man and Biosphere Program (MAB) and Haifa University. During the process,

Balancing Conservation and Development in Ramat Menashe

work teams will be set up, in which residents will be involved to the greatest extent possible. **The goal is to set up a community-municipal partnership for sustainable development.**

Challenges along the Way

While there is no hiding the excitement of the stakeholders, all are fully aware that the process will not be easy. This is partially because the process itself, in the words of the head of the council's environmental unit, Liron Shapira, "constitutes the very antithesis of the current system of legislation, enforcement and court sentences. In the case of the Megiddo Regional Council, the local authority is ready to relinquish its power and to share it with the residents. The idea is to transfer responsibility to residents themselves in an ongoing process, which will not be dependent on the municipal administration in office at any specific time, or officials who might be replaced in the next election."

What are some of the challenges? Joel Siegel believes that one of the main difficulties is finding ways to transform an abstract vision into practical reality – for example, to plan industrial areas and infrastructures, without taking the soul out of the process. Ways will have to be found to maintain voluntary involvement in the long term, to keep the pioneering spirit alive. In more practical terms, human and financial resources will be needed to move the process along. And further down the line, means will have to be found to enlist the support and partnership of adjacent local authorities so that the biosphere region would encompass the entire Ramat Menashe region.

Why Promote a Biosphere Region?

The establishment of a biosphere region has a price tag, but the price should be well worth it - economically, socially and environmentally.

Quality of life in such an area for present and future generations is a given, but more than this, green branding of agricultural and industrial initiatives should provide a competitive edge, both nationally and internationally. With international recognition, improved business opportunities, quality of life, and community pride and empowerment, biosphere regions have much going for them.

Liron Shapira has labeled the Ramat Menashe area the "Central Park of Israel," a large expanse of space bounded by the two population centers of Tel Aviv and Haifa. Within this biosphere region, communities will be able to act according to commonly agreed rules which define what they should and should not do and in what fashion within each of the zones in the biosphere region – core area, buffer zone and transition area.

The mayor of the Megiddo Regional Council, Hanan Erez, is fully convinced that the bottom-up approach, which is part and parcel of the biosphere region concept, works. September 2006 should see the selection of the planning team that will prepare the master plan for a biosphere region in the regional council, but already today, steps are being taken to raise public awareness, through community meetings, websites, and an information kit. In short, everyone is gearing up to transform vision into reality.



Shlomo Katz
Director,
Northern Region
of the Ministry of
Environmental
Protection

The Ramat Menashe region is not only rich in natural assets, but it is equally "rich" in national infrastructures, whether a planned 400 kV high-voltage line of the Israel Electric Company, the Hagit gas turbine, the Trans-Israel Highway (Road #6), plans for a solid waste disposal site and plans for a new city of Eron. Our challenge is to find ways to allow essential infrastructures to exist with minimum damage to the environment.

There are many dilemmas in planning biosphere regions, including how to encourage high-density building while preserving a rural atmosphere or how to enable the coexistence of essential national infrastructures and open space conservation. To help answer these critical questions, a new environmental unit was established for Yokneam, Megiddo and Ramat Yishai, which should help increase public awareness and promote a comprehensive vision of future development in this ecologically sensitive area.

Perhaps what is most distinctive is the level of public participation and activism. Just last week, at the end of August 2006, a first of its kind public hearing was held on an initiative to transfer lands from the Megiddo Regional Council to the town of Yokneam in order to allow the latter to expand. The greens of Megiddo did an impressive job of raising public awareness of the issues at stake. Residents made their voice known on behalf of the conservation of open spaces through thousands of petitions and participation in the hearing.

I have no doubt that the process initiated by the Megiddo Regional Council for establishing a biosphere region, in which public participation plays such an important role, is a healthy process, which will prove effective in finding the right balance between conservation and development.