

The Eco-ME Centre:

A Model for Social and Environmental Sustainability across Divides

Envision a centre within Israel and Palestine that is jointly owned, feels safe, welcoming, and easily accessible without the need for troublesome travel permits, passing through checkpoints, or illegally entering restricted areas. Imagine an inspiring landscape with buildings reflecting Middle Eastern culture, built on principles of eco-design using natural local materials, closed system technology, energy conservation, and adaptation to arid zones. Here international and regional leaders, individuals and groups gather to participate in diverse retreats, meetings,



Members of the core group scout the Judean Desert for potential locations for the Eco-ME Centre.

workshops and conferences whilst learning about the principles of sustainability – both personal and environmental. The surrounding majestic and historic Judean Mountains and the Dead Sea provide a sense of quiet and rejuvenation, helping participants arrive at dialogue and action in an integrated and inspired way. Successful on the local level, the centre becomes globally known as a model for holistic peace work, regional and international cooperation, ecological innovation, healthy living, and deep exchange of knowledge. It becomes a beacon of hope in a too often depressing time and place.

This vision is not a dream. For the last two years, a group of young, passionate and skilled Palestinian and Israeli leaders have networked through the Arava Institute for Environmental Studies program (AIES) (www.arava.org), and a range of regional and international organizations including: Search for Common Ground, Friends of the Earth ME, Sulha Peace Project, Saknin Towns Association, Holy Land Trust - Bethlehem, and the Peace Research Village Association. This is their vision and they are now ready to take the first step, bringing it to life in the desert by the shore of the Dead Sea. In this effort, they are now being supported by an advisory council of international leaders, professionals and elders.

Since 2007, Ilana Meallem – an alumna and staff member of the Arava Institute for Environmental Studies and the founder of the Eco-Spirit Middle East Initiative (<http://groups.google.com/group/ecospirit---middle-east>), has spent her winters in the northern Dead Sea, hosting weekend gatherings and organizational retreats at her temporary home in Metzukei Dragot. Here men and women of all ages gathered from across Israel and the West Bank, bringing their own tents, food and water to share. It was this experience, and the years of

working in multi-cultural and regional environmental cooperation and peace building that inspired Ilana and her co-visionaries Rina Kedem and Yair Wahle, to make the creation of a permanent home for such activities their mission.



A weekend Eco-Spirit Middle East gathering at the Dead Sea just after the Sderot-Gaza violence in 2008

The Middle East is certainly a key location on the global political conflict map today. The United Nations, multiple governments, peace organizations and care groups have tried repeatedly to establish a foundation for a lasting peace in the region. Despite all of these efforts, today we are seeing an escalation in violence, stronger barriers between people - both physical and psychological, pessimism, burn-out amongst activists, and failed peace agreements. Knowing that hundreds of peace organisations are investing efforts to create positive change on multiple levels, there is still no local and mutually accessible place that is dedicated to facilitating this work.

The Eco-ME Centre will be a community-based project that answers the dire need for a enriching, safe, equitable and convenient location for Palestinians and Israelis to gather, something that up-till now has rarely been possible. Participants in programs at the Centre will be able to engage in dialogue without having to incur the great cost of international travel to Jordan, Cyprus, Turkey, the USA and other locations where such programs have, of necessity, been scheduled in the past. The strength of this project is its provision of a local central point, a physical “home for peace” to which Israelis and Palestinians can easily gravitate, increasing the impact of their collective work, generating trust and optimism, allowing for the deep integration into daily life and making connections with those who work for peace all over the world.

The Centre will host a diverse range of events including workshops in non-violent communication, community building, permaculture, somatic leadership, project design



The Centre will model sustainable practices such as eco-building, energy conservation & permaculture design.

management and evaluation, expressive arts, music, spirituality, media and conflict transformation. Its facilities will have the capacity to host conferences for up to 200 people. In addition, the centre will host interns, international exchange students, and volunteers, running longer term work-study programs on environment, languages, leadership skills and much more. In this way the Centre will become economically sustainable, the main income being generated by educational programs, conferences and trainings, whilst maximising local resources.

The Centre is already part of an international network of communities and will be open for visitors, experts and cooperation partners. The actual building of the Centre will be done with the assistance of motivated Palestinian and Israeli youth, such as the Sulhita Peace Project, as well as members of the 500 strong network of skilled Jordanian, Israeli, Palestinian and International alumni of the AIES.

Building upon the momentum of this past work, the founders of the Eco-ME Centre plan to take their vision to the next level this winter with a two month residential program designed to properly launch a permanent centre. This time will be dedicated to community building, visioning, practice and application. A core group will use temporary shelters to host a two month camp in the Northern Dead Sea area during which there will be weekend retreats and workshops for additional participants to gather support for the project, and to provide practical experience. Specific times will be dedicated for the visioning and planning of the next stages of the Centre including an intensive brainstorming retreat where diverse professionals and key advisers will be invited to help design and plan the architectural, fundraising, social, economic and environmental aspects of the Eco-ME Centre, with the goal of finalizing a business plan by February 2011. Life at the camp will be very simple allowing the core group and participants to connect to the natural surroundings in a modest and environmentally sustainable way. The Northern Dead Sea is within close proximity to Jerusalem, Ramallah and other major West Bank cities, and is one of the only zones where Palestinians and Israelis can meet without acquiring special military travel permits.