



Launching the **EcoME** Centre

A model for social & environmental sustainability across divides

5 month update & next steps...

Dear friends and family, in these next pages we are happy to share with you some of the key landmarks we achieved and the questions, challenges and insights that arose during the first 5 months of EcoME.

EcoME is a lifelong project which we are committed to. It is a place in which we wish to live in a holistic way – approaching peace work from multiple levels. In EcoME phase 1 we experimented in creating an “Ecological Education and Peace Centre” supported by a mini-community. Our aim being to research the social, political, infrastructural, spiritual and cultural aspects of creating a space where different cultures can meet, seeking to co-create an atmosphere of inclusivity, peace and ecological consciousness.



1. View of the entrance to EcoME. In this picture Jordanian, Israeli and Palestinian students of the Arava Institute visit EcoME as part of their study tour. Later they played volley ball, mingled around the fire, enjoyed a delicious dinner, took part in a panel on EcoME and slept the night in Bedouin tents or under the stars.

On December 15th 2010, five professionals from the fields of; environmental and outdoor education, ecological architecture, permaculture, renewable energy and inter-cultural group facilitation committed to launching phase 1 of EcoME. This group effectively formed through the Arava Institute for Environmental Studies (www.arava.org) network of alumni, staff and associated projects. The pilot site was located at the Almog/Jericho junction, surrounded by the inspiring landscape of the Judean Desert and the Dead Sea. This part of the West Bank is mutually accessible to West Bank Palestinians and Israelis. Thanks to positive local and international responses and the core groups’ years of nurturing a strong network of personal connections, the project quickly built up momentum and the pilot phase was extend from 2 to 5 months.

From Dec until May 2011 EcoME served as a home for peace workers and activists. It provided a safe, welcoming and reachable location for some 1,500 individuals to participate in diverse retreats, organisational meetings, sharing circles, educational evenings, trainings, Arabic/Hebrew lessons, outdoor experiences and workshops, whilst learning about the personal and environmental principles of sustainability and how they interrelate. We also estimate that over 1,000 individuals were hosted informally at EcoME, spontaneously arriving to help in construction, logistically support events or simply make new friends.

2. In response to the limitations faced by Arab women with young children in attending multiple day workshops, two female participants of an NVC workshop initiated the first “families weekend” at EcoME. Young volunteers from Tul Karem, Tel Aviv and Jerusalem worked with a fantastic team, leading activities and in general support. The motivation and talent of these youth was an inspiration to us all.

3. The men have a few hours for deep sharing about their lives and the challenges and advantages they face as men within their own culture and present situation. Meanwhile the women and children are in a joint activity together. Later the groups swapped, and the women have a chance to meet.

4. Participants in a story telling workshop break for a refreshing movement - storytelling helps people to share of themselves on a much deeper level.



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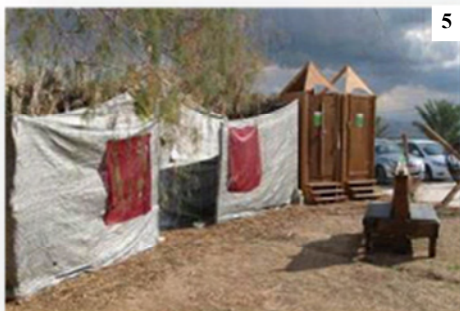


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Many described EcoME as an “Oasis in a Desert,” since the Centre and its small group of dreamers and believers provide such a source of inspiration, hope and rejuvenation to so many.



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Maintaining EcoME was a lot of work. Daily duties ranged from emptying the compost toilets, gardening, washing dishes, cooking, shopping in Jericho, collecting dry matter for the compost system, gathering wood, hosting guests and cleaning, to coordinating events, facilitating circles, responding to challenges as they arise and future development planning. We wish to honour the people who lived at and took care of EcoME on-site, creating a talented and diverse community of locals and internationals. Volunteers came from Switzerland, Germany, France, Italy, Tunisia, Austria, USA, Chile, UK and across Israel and Palestine.



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We also wish to express our deep gratitude for all the help we have received thus far. We are astonished how fast our experiment became a place for people to come in contact with each other, themselves and with the healing power of nature. We are aware that without such wide support and generosity (time and resources), this dream could not come true.

5. To model sustainable living, we built our own outdoor shower system, with grey water reuse and four compost toilets.

6. Our very own organic garden, where towards the end of Phase 1 we were harvesting all our greens (lettuces, kale) and lots of pumpkins!

✚ Creating a Unique Platform for Organizational Networking:



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The concept of EcoME is to be a platform where the peace, environmental and social work that is already happening in this region, as well as new initiatives, can be empowered, deepened and strengthened by the character and the quality of the Centre.



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In Phase 1, the following organizations utilized EcoME for meetings, workshops and presentations: Visit Palestine, Combatants for Peace, Arava Peace and Environmental Network, Wounded Crossing Borders, Time is Now, Sulha Peace Project, Nonviolent Communication – Mifgash/Steps2Peace, MEJDI, YALLAH, Peace Research Village, Emerging Leaders Program, Women’s Healing Group, Arava Institute for Environmental Studies, Permaculture-Israel, Just Vision, Spirituality without Borders, and Women of Cyprus. In addition the Centre drew a significant amount interest from nearby Israeli settlements, and many individuals visited EcoME to attend educational activities and dialogue with their Palestinian neighbours.



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As well as groups networking with each other, EcoME formed many working relationships too. One of them is with EcoWEEK, an organisation encouraging architects and budding designers to take environmental and social responsibilities with their professional work. Having been impressed by EcoME’s activities, we were invited as the subject of a design group in the spring conference in ThessalonikiThessaloniki, Greece. 14 international architects redesigned the masterplan and individual buildings of the existing site, taking into consideration the climate, cultural and political environments and communal needs. Hearing the reasons the architects chose EcoME over other design projects, its inclusion of environmental as well as social and political correction, was a very touching experience and was echoed by the design-judging panel. Affecting designers and well as having their input were the fruits of this exchange and there are plans to bring some of these designs to reality.



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7. At the Inter-generational weekend in Jan 2011, some 60 professionals and students of diverse ages and backgrounds gathered to guide us in the first stages of EcoME.

8 Unique to EcoME, dialogue, networking and socializing can happen in a more natural and restful environment, under the stars, around the fire, drinking tea and smoking the traditional Nargila.

9. The Sulha steering committee runs a 2 day leadership training for its team at EcoME, meanwhile 2 other NGOs are using the premises for training – a great opportunity for organizational networking!

10. Eco-design of EcoME prepared by the team of international Architects at EcoWEEK 2011 in Greece.

✚ Inter-Cultural Aspects: Inclusivity and Creating a Safe Space:

In a quest to create a space where the majority of people (young/old, religious/irreligious, Jewish/Muslim/Christian, married/non-married etc.) feel safe, are able to share openly and be physically comfortable, we decided not to allow alcohol, illegal substances, meat, fish and weapons into EcoME. In contrast to the surrounding Jewish settlements, there was no barbed wire fencing or soldiers at the entrance to the centre and we never even locked the gate. For a group of Israelis and Palestinians to live like this in the current security situation takes a lot of faith, both in the work that we are doing and in all those who are visiting EcoME. It also takes constant awareness as to what power is guiding our actions, and how much attention we give fear. The location of EcoME on the Jericho/Almog junction was in one respect a big advantage since it was so easily accessible by public transport (both from Ramallah and Jerusalem). However this junction is not only noisy, but notorious for security searches by the Israeli military, drug searches by the Israeli police and rowdy Palestinian youth in the middle of the night. This fact continuously reminded us of our existence in the midst of a crisis area, surrounded by conflict and acts of oppression.

Over time we made good relationships with the local authorities, both Israeli and Palestinian, and as the trust between us grew these forces became more supportive of our work and took care to discreetly monitor our safety. Members of the Palestinian security even took part (unofficially) in a dialogue group during one of the events, arriving loaded with fresh juices. This was for us an amazing model of trust building.

Another example of the type of safety created within EcoME was the ability to talk about “hard issues” like land ownership, military service, the Intifadas and identities. The land that the temporary site of EcoME is located on is, according to the Israeli authorities, owned by a member of a nearby Israeli settlement next to Jericho, yet to Palestinians this can be seen as stolen land. This brought up lots of discussions and for some was a real issue of conflict, questioning whether EcoME is just another “Israeli settlement”? We tried to give this and other conflicting issues a safe space for discussion at EcoME, while at the same time researching amongst the local Palestinian community the history and previous ownership of the land.

One more aspect of inclusivity involved respecting spiritual and religious practices. The absence of meat at EcoME allowed for the abidance of dietary rules for religious Jews (to a certain level), whilst the absence of alcohol respected the needs of observant Muslims. In addition, it was in alignment with the environmental and socially conscious ideals of the centre, since we were not feasible to secure organic or free range animal products. However, this was not an easy choice. For a significant number of guests and potential partners the absence of meat was a difficult adaptation since meat plays such an important role in Arab food culture, and to serve a meal without it can be seen as disrespectful. On the other hand, wine is used ceremonially by Jews for the Shabbat and other festivals. In the end we chose to permit wine only for the sanctification blessing and some meat was consumed outside the premises (e.g. when a local friend from Jericho invited the community to join his family for a meaty picnic, we sat just outside the fence).



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11. Creating a space that is also safe and welcoming for young children was an important aspect in making EcoME feel like “Home”. In this picture, children from Jericho play with Eden, our youngest resident.

12. Muslim participants of the 1st non-violent communication workshop break for the Muslim Friday noon prayer.

An additional interesting issue that became apparent early on is the different cultural approaches to non-marital relations and public displays of intimacy. Whereas for most sectors of Israeli society this is not such a volatile issue, within Arab society there are very strict rules around this topic. Great care was needed to ensure that EcoME did not become known as a place for people to do things that they would not be permitted to do in their own communities. This was especially important, as it created a family atmosphere in EcoME, which felt safe for people to bring their children. This is a complex issue that we are in baby steps to understanding how to negotiate, and an example where the guidance of our dedicated and very experienced steering committee was invaluable.

Great efforts were taken to both meet the needs of the varying religions, their prayer times, and still bring in a more universal spiritual practice. Prior to meals, all present (and sometimes there were as many as 130 people!) gathered in a circle to take a moment of silence. One person made a prayer in any language or form, giving thanks for the food, shelter, protection and all the blessings that we have. In addition we had a meditation/prayer room, and a central spot in EcoME that was also designated for prayer. During large weekend workshops there was always a question how to give equal time and energy to the Muslim and Jewish Friday prayers and over time we researched the best way to do this.

An interesting cultural aspect was the “ecological” facilities, such as the open air showers, dry compost toilets and organic waste composting system. For many these were very exciting aspects of EcoME, stimulating curiosity and the wish to know more. However, some found them more challenging and an inconvenience. Especially problematic was the lack of water inside the toilets which many Muslims said is necessary for cleanliness rituals before prayer. We managed to find some innovative solutions and this issue brought up interesting questions and debates about the different ways religions work, the environment, society and the interface between these factors and peace work.

Lastly, and still on the topic of inclusivity, it’s important to mention the challenge we faced by ‘too much’ inclusivity. It rapidly became clear that creating a contained atmosphere, which allows for deep work during the workshops or within the community’s internal processes, meant sometimes needing to ‘close’ EcoME. This is one of the limitations of the small area of land in which we were functioning. Furthermore, when holding such a welcoming space with a large flux of people, the level of potential influence is great, but it can also be exhausting and very challenging to bring real depth; this is one of the main questions we take with us into phase 2.



13. Old and young gather to take food at communal meals. It’s actually not so easy to run an economical kitchen that can meet all the diverse needs and preferences of a multi – cultural setting. Often Arab youth, eating outside of the home for the first time, were challenged by the lack of meat or unfamiliar dishes at EcoME.

✚ Finding Common Ground in the Desert – Outdoor Backpacking Expeditions and Education:



One way to build relationships is through a shared outdoor experience, when individually and in a group dynamic people are challenged to go beyond their own physical and emotional limits. During the five months of activity at EcoME, our experienced team lead five multi-day backpacking trips and several day trips to the natural environment surrounding EcoME.

Participants included Israeli and Palestinian youth, partners and friends of EcoME, international volunteers and a group of leaders in the fields of environmental and social advocacy. Being outdoors provides opportunities to meet other life-forms thereby rediscovering our humanity and each other. We cook, eat, sleep and wake up together, look up at the same stars with wonder, struggle with physical challenges, help each other, learn about our environment and take moments to self-reflect.

Away from mundane life, socially constructed power relations are redefined in accordance with the demands of the moment and hearts open to new relationships and understandings.

14. Climbing up the side of the Upper Wadi Og valley, a group of Palestinians and Israeli social entrepreneur enjoy a 2 days backpacking trip.

15. The core group of EcoME and its most committed partners from Jericho and Ramallah share breakfast during a 2 day closing expedition along the spectacular Wadi Qelt stream. For some this was the first such outdoor adventure, and a truly memorable experience. On the way pairs discussed the challenges of the past months, their growth curves, needs, hopes and plans for the next phase of EcoME.

16. Participants in the Sulhita, a 3 day workshop for 60 Palestinian and Israeli youth (ages 14-21yrs), are co-lead by an Arab-Jewish team from EcoME into Wadi Og for a sunrise hike.



Social Aspects: Peace work within a Community Setting – not an easy task!

Since the vision of EcoME is to create a home for holistic peace work, it was clear that we would not only work but live at the centre. Over time the committed group grew from 5 to 15 with many more friends coming on a regular basis, but unable to “live” with us. The intensive community setting was characterized by a morning activity to attune our bodies, minds and hearts together for the new day. This was followed by work meetings, communal meals, prayer times and a shared work load – all done on a voluntary basis.

Living together in such an intensive way is not easy, we faced numerous challenges, disagreements and questions and very soon it was evident how such a centre must be based upon sustainable, healthy and honest relationships from the base up and a good balance between personal and communal time. For this, a strong level of trust and awareness is necessary, trust in our own capacities and in each others’. More so, the understanding of each member’s strengths and weaknesses is essential and for this we need to get to know ourselves and the other on the deepest level possible; this is constant work, and we only touched on it in these first months.



17. Building a community geodesic dome from recycled water pipes and date palms. This dome raised lots of excitement amongst friends from Jericho, since they are cheap and simple to construct and very useful for housing, play areas or as a meeting space. Due to popular demand we hope to host trainings at EcoME next year on the building of similar ecological structures.

Consequently, a lot of our efforts were focused on creating this communal foundation, made even more complex across the political and cultural divides. In this respect, we were very fortunate to receive help and knowledge from experts in Permaculture approaches, Nonviolent Communication, and various methods for solving inter-personal conflict. We are especially thankful to members of the Tamera community

(www.tamera.org) in Portugal who supported us in building trust, transparency and truth through tools they have developed over 30 years of community research.

✚ The Economics of Giving and Volunteerism:

The daily functioning of the EcoME Centre (rent, food and equipment) was based solely on donations and good will, and we were amazed as to how generous people were. From the first day, men and women of all ages arrived from across Israel and Palestine with gifts (blankets, mats, tents, plates, fruits, vegetables, clothes, a projector, electricity cables, tools and much, much more). Greenpeace Middle East loaned EcoME a solar panel system for the duration of the project, and Derekh Ha'Teva donated the compost toilet system. Even more incredible was the amount of manpower that arrived. Initially the site was quite a dump requiring huge amounts of work: first lots of cleaning, then building toilets, showers, a kitchen, meeting rooms, Bedouin tents and shaded areas. So many joined the effort, working together despite barriers (language, social, political) and in this way EcoME was co-created becoming everybody's home.

Over the course of phase 1, we were able to generate some income, receiving donations for hosting events, educational visits, meals, panels and from volunteers who contributed to food and board. We were even able to subsidise some of the workshops and provide support for those in need. However it is important to note that a significant number of people worked for months, non-stop, 24/7 without a wage. The sustainability of this is another question that we carry into phase 2.

Additionally, we received significant contributions in the form of time, knowledge and expertise. During phase 1 the core group and community were offered trainings in communication, permaculture planning, biogas, spiritual development, financial and organizational planning, Neo-psychology, Eco-design, community building, primal development and visioning. For these donations of wisdom we deeply thank the generosity and care of our larger community

✚ Next Steps – Further Training and Residential Phase:

Following the completion of phase 1 we packed EcoME up for the summer and the core group is presently in the USA continuing diverse leadership training in preparation for the next residential - to begin in Nov 2011. Our objectives for the phase 2 training are to strengthen our relationships, learn more skills, especially in leadership and the alchemy of conflict energies, secure financial and physical support and look for a permanent site.

In October, the core group of EcoME will enter an intense education month with the community of Tamera located in Portugal. Our aim is to learn more about inner and outer violent patterns, their interconnectedness and sources and how to transform them. We will also learn about developing a communal vessel that can be an incubator for peace work, the steps from personal to global transformation, and the strengthening of the global network.



18. The famous donation sign. Over 5 months at EcoME we received a significant amount of donations. This is truly a peoples' project from the grass roots up!

19. Volunteers from Germany, Israel and the UK work together to create an indoor meeting space.

Phase 3 will begin in Nov 2011, when we plan to re-open EcoME for hosting events and the development of sustainable businesses and deep partnerships. We propose a clearer delegation of tasks to ensure increased personal sustainability within the leading group and an overall healthy functioning. The focus will be on five main areas: 1) Continuation of the Nonviolent Communication program with Roberta Wall and Hagit Lifshitz, 2) Development of the Outdoor Club, 3) Compost toilets – ‘small business’ partnership with Derekh Ha’Teva, 4) Hosting educational tours/meetings and short events such as the Sulha and 5 Rhythms workshop, and 5) Community development and visioning process.

The Nonviolent Communication (NVC) training program at EcoME includes monthly multi day retreats to deepen the skills and consciousness of nonviolence for activists, families and communities. This year’s programs will include special retreats for women only, for families, leaders and activists. We anticipate participants joining us from across the West Bank and Israel for trainings including NVC sessions, practice groups, social activities, movement, prayers and experiences in the desert.

The Outdoor Club aims to serve local young people, both Palestinian and Israeli, in pursuing their passion for knowing wild nature, seeking healthy challenges and adventures, pitting themselves against themselves in order to grow and getting to know the ‘other’ behind the walls of fear.

The club’s goals are:

1. To create a container for experience and knowledge on how to organize and lead cross cultural, Palestinian/Israeli environmental, outdoor, adventurous, multi-day trips (incl. cultural issues, conflict resolution, relevant laws and procedures, territorial restrictions etc.)
2. To establish a hub for a community of outdoor lovers in the area of Jericho/ Almog (incl. resources, communication, inspiration, gear.)
3. To train and empower young leaders from both sides to take ownership and responsibilities in running the club.

The Club has recently received a donation of retired equipment (backpacks, mats, sleeping bags etc) from Outward Bound - Midpines, California and we are now seeking funds to ship this equipment to the Middle East, so the club can begin functioning in Nov 2011.

The community development process will involve weekly meetings for the committed group of Palestinians and Israelis that hold EcoME. The group will explore personal growth, interpersonal communication, visioning, outdoor education and more. The purpose of the group is to strengthen the trust and relationships of the core people holding EcoME as we learned that the hardest part of peace work is to actually live it ourselves. We strive to be role models and we believe that if we demonstrate impeccable actions in our own relationships and management of EcoME we will inspire many (with fewer words) and provide a practical example of what is possible in the relationships between us; Palestinians and Israelis sharing the same land. In addition the group will accommodate the deep wish of people who want to live in EcoME and be part of its core group and because of various circumstances cannot live with us yet.

Lastly, the land we rented in phase 1 is our current default as we are searching for larger land that can contain both the needs of the centre and the community and is further away from the highway. Many of you who visited were aware of the loud noise from the road which was a challenge and a price for such an amazingly accessible location! For phase we hope to settle permanently on a piece of land so we can start building the Centre according to green principles; combining local traditional knowledge with modern environmental techniques. The permanent site will include solar energy, grey water and bio-gas systems, water landscapes, ecological buildings and arid-land agriculture.

How Can You Support Us?

There are many ways that one can contribute to the realization of a positive change and healthy living worldwide and in Israel, Palestine and the Middle East. EcoME is a place where that can happen. All support is welcomed, both financial and physical; you can work with us too! The building of a Home is Peace, a foundation for future generations and all life, is a deep process that we are engaged and committed too. We wish to thank you in advance for your interest and contributions to this vision in any way it will reveal itself. Know that anything you will invest in this project and in the people who carry it will be used only for this purpose only.

Donations:

Non-tax deductible donations can be sent via paypal (www.paypal.com) to ecome.centre@gmail.com

Tax-deductible donations of \$5,000 or more can be sent to:

EcoME Alumni Project/ Friends of the Arava Institute
179 Boylston St.
Building P, 3rd Floor
Jamaica Plain, MA 02130

Unfortunately we currently do not have a way for smaller –tax deductible donations to be made to EcoME

Contact Us:

For more information on EcoME; questions on donations, events, joining our mailing list, volunteering etc please contact us at EcoME.Centre@gmail.com

Special Thanks.....

To the following dear supporters and organisations for all that you are doing to promote Peace in each given moment and your generous contribution to EcoME:

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