



FRIENDS of the Arava Institute: NEWS

ALUMNI REPORT

SPRING 2007

A Map to Safe Water

FROM THE DESK OF

Eric Berzon, President FAI Board of Trustees

They looked like typical young backpackers, waiting at Oakland airport. Ilana and Mohammad, Israeli and Jordanian, were about to start a Sierra Club summer internship, driving a Prius along the west coast to publicize hybrid cars. Our house was to be their base. Along with four other students, what ensued was six weeks experiencing this great group in action; their close friendships, their commitment to the environment, the Arava Institute, and each other. As chair of the FAI Board, I was content with my commitment, happy to have such fascinating students visit the Bay area.



Hybrid revolution: Ilana Meallem, (left), and Mohammad Taher in California.

Fast forward six months. My family enters a meeting room at the Jerusalem Y. Here were about forty AIES alumni, Israeli Arabs and Jews, Jordanians, Palestinians, Americans and Canadians, all animatedly reviewing their accomplishments and a shared future of environmental cooperation.

Later, at a big boisterous meal together in a nearby restaurant, my wife Danielle and I suddenly realized this energy wasn't just the six interns who stayed with us, there was a unique spark in all the alumni; a genuine collective and committed relationship.

The Arava Institute is a tiny place. Each semester, some thirty-five students from across the region and around the world live, work and study together. How can they possibly impact an area plagued by so much mistrust and violence? Yet their alumni numbers grow. They lead projects across political boundaries and maintain a dialogue where none existed before.

Where else do we have such an opportunity to contribute our dollars and time to positive efforts that will improve the Mideast in the long term? Each semester is another small step, as another group learns to work together – peacefully – to address urgent environmental issues. As Palestinian Alumna Dana Rassas recently put it, "After you know the other, its impossible to hate".

Mousa Diabat is a graduate of the Arava Institute and is currently pursuing a master's degree at Ben Gurion University/Sde Boker. Mousa holds parallel undergraduate degrees in Environmental Science and Science and Technology Education from the Technion, Israel's Institute of Technology based in Haifa. He is a participating member of the Arava Institute's Transboundary Stream Restoration project. The project was launched to develop a constructive approach to restoring stream quality in Israel and Palestine, utilizing development of watershed models that provide clear indications of contaminant loadings, and tailored to the unique local ecological and geographical conditions. This research will lay the foundations for an effective river restoration strategy in Israel and Palestine. The research is funded by the Middle East Regional Cooperation (MERC) Program of the US Agency for International Development (USAID).

Natural water transport systems, like water itself, have no political, cultural or religious affiliations. In the Mideast, transboundary streams move across country lines with a fluidity that's somewhat ironic given the harsh human strictures of border crossings and identification checks.

Hydro-chemical pollution in these streams poses threats that – one would argue – are just as deadly and dangerous as the human conflicts that plague the land. But every day, I cross national boundaries via a computer running geographical information systems (GIS) in an effort to identify, map and model sample streams that

carry their own dangers to unsuspecting populations throughout the region.

I first became aware of the Arava Institute when I hosted one of their representatives at a Technion Green Day conference I had organized. I was so impressed with their curriculum and vision that I began courses at AIES the same day I took my last senior exams at Technion. Attending AIES was simply the beginning of a dream come true.

I was born in the village of Turaan, about 10 kilometres north of Nazareth. In effect, I am Arab, Palestinian, Israeli and Muslim. You might assume this little bit of biography makes it as easy for me to cross political borders as the water in the transboundary streams I monitor. Far from it. In Israel, I am an Arab; in Palestine, I am an Israeli. This is one of the reasons AIES so appealed to me: it's innovative Peace-Building and Environmental Leadership Seminar (PELS) insures that every student focus on identity, dialogue, conflict resolution and conciliation.

Certainly conciliation is a focal part of my current work. Along with the skills and high-tech tools that allow me to model water pollution, stream flow and geography, AIES provided me with another, equally necessary aptitude: the ability and confidence to work with other envi-



Mousa in the field: In Israel, I am an Arab; In Palestine, I am an Israeli.

ronmentalists, whether Palestinian, (continued on opposite side)

Friends of the Arava Institute is the North American fundraising arm of the Arava Institute for Environmental Studies, the premier teaching and research program in the Middle East, preparing future Arab and Jewish leaders to cooperatively solve the region's environmental challenges. **For more information or to make a donation, please contact us at 1.888.31.ARAVA or friendsofarava@arava.org.**



The Arava Institute for Environmental Studies
מכון הערבה ללימודי הסביבה
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Arava Institute Supports Palestinian Study Permits

Karen Fierst, FAI Board Trustee

On December 18, 2006, the Arava Institute (AIES) joined Sawsan Salameh as a petitioner to the Israeli Supreme Court in a case against the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) and its implementation of a total ban on Palestinian student visas. The petitioners were represented by lawyers from Gisha, the Center for the Legal Protection of Freedom of Movement. My husband Barry and I attended this session together with students, faculty, alumni, and staff of AIES.

Gisha attorneys Noam Peleg and Sari Bashi argued the petitioners' case – that the ban constituted a violation of any academic institution's freedom to admit qualified students, irrespective of nationality – to a three judge panel, including Chief Justice, Dorit Beinisch. AIES joined the heads of six major Israeli universities, along with the Ministers of Education and the National Academy of Science and members of Israel's Knesset, in demanding cancellation of the ban.

As a result of this petition, the Court ruled the ban unreasonable and gave the IDF 60 days to set criteria for admitting qualified Palestinian students to study in Israel.

The Court further instructed the State to allow Sawsan Salameh, an outstanding Palestinian doctoral student in chemistry, admitted to the Hebrew University on a full scholarship, to continue her studies beyond the six months allotted by the state. Further, the court indicated to the IDF that it expected Ms. Salameh to be permitted to study for the duration of her doctorate.

The State had argued that Israel's Citizenship Law, previously criticized by the Court for violating individual rights, does not allow Palestinian students to enter Israel for longer than six months. The Court accepted Gisha's argument that the State's legal interpretation was unreasonable.

Palestinian participation was – and is – core to the mission of AIES and its commitment to resolving the region's many urgent ecological challenges through cooperation. AIES founders envisioned a rigorous environmental study program unique in its enrollment of Jordanian, Palestinian and Israeli students. For the most part, balanced recruitment was achieved until the IDF issued its sweeping ban.

Over the past two years, that ban has affected the enrollment in many Israeli educational institutions including AIES, which counts such enrollments, in part, toward the achievement of its fundamental goals. While AIES continued to recruit Jordanians, Arab-Israelis, and Palestinians not affected by the regulations, the faculty and staff worked tirelessly – and often in vain – to obtain student visas for other qualified Palestinians, who met all academic requirements.

On December 26, 2006, AIES staff attended a hearing held by the Education Committee of the Knesset to further illustrate support for the issuance of Palestinian student visas.

Such active, vocal support for Palestinian student rights is part of the AIES mission of teaching environmental sciences and activism to a highly qualified and diverse group of Middle Eastern students. As FAI Board Trustees and founding members of Kibbutz Ketura, where AIES is located, Barry and I were inspired by the justice of the Israeli Supreme Court ruling, the true test of which will be the implementation of a viable – and peaceful – solution for all those who come to Israel to study and live.

ANCIENT CLIPPINGS

Methusaleh Lives!

Seth Morrison & Rob Turano, FAI Board Trustees

Even those unfamiliar with the Bible have heard of Methusaleh. He was the son of Enoch – the man who walked with God – and the father of Noah. He was the man who embodied God's mercy in humankind, and he lived to be one thousand.

In a small pot, in the experimental orchards of Kibbutz Ketura, where the Arava Institute is located, grows a date palm tree. No ordinary tree, this one sprung from a seed found during an archeological dig at the early Israelites' last military redoubt, Masada: a Judean palm seed that survived the Caesars. "Succulent and sweet," is how the Roman naturalist Pliny the Elder recalled the fruit of these trees, and further writings tell of the dates' medicinally restorative powers.

After three years, Methusaleh – the name given this miraculous little sprout – continues to spread its unusually long leaves. It's now over one meter high and in very good health. Independent carbon dating of the remaining seed coat from the new plant has accurately placed the seeds to the time of the Jewish revolt in 70 CE.

"People tell me Methusaleh looks like the palm trees you see in your dentist's office," says AIES researcher and faculty

member Dr. Elaine Solowey, manager of AIES' experimental orchards and a world-renowned expert on biblical agriculture, who is responsible for germinating the tree. "But it's not true.

"Judean date palms were crushed into near extinction as the Romans began to kill off food sources to the rebelling Judeans. The parents of this little tree haven't been around for a couple thousand years.

"Most intriguing to us – besides the fact of Methusaleh's existence – is the potential for inherent medicinal properties in such ancient plants. Cultivations like this are part of several current research programs helping us advance our knowledge in the fields of natural medicine, conservation of rare indigenous flora and the domestication of medicinal species."

Will we one day experience Pliny's succulent dates?

"Date palms are either male or female," says David Lehrer, Director of AIES, "Only the female of the species reproduces, and we won't know Methusaleh's gender for some years to come. But if dates do appear...well, imagine the first bite of a 2,000 year old delicacy."



A Map to Safe Water

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Jordanian or Israeli.

During project team meetings, we share



Extreme example? Stream water sample from the Nitani Shalom industrial area.

the best and worst of our field work, lunch together, and participate in long technical discussions.

We deal with facts because we know our solutions are

urgently needed. Even as we work in the early stages of this program – gathering transboundary stream-related data for analyses and codification – we understand that the challenges of restoring our streams to healthful qualities will require committed specialists from a variety of professional, ethnic and cultural backgrounds, who will actively and cohesively address the greater challenges of environmental safety for all who live in the Mideast.