



"Conserving and Developing Egypt's Protected Areas"

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The 39th round of the Cairo Climate Talks, which took place at the German Science Center on May 17th, tackled the threats Egypt's national parks face and how to better protect and conserve them.

Since the creation of the first protected area in 1983, Egypt has officially established 30 national parks which cover approximately 15% of the country's landmass. Fifteen additional sites including the Red Sea are earmarked for protection in the coming years. Among other natural treasures, the protectorates feature 40 million year old whale skeletons, medicinal plants, mangroves, exotic species of trees and animals, breathtaking coral reefs and mountains that contain millions of years of geological, animal and human history.

"Egypt's protected areas are home to a wealth of land and aquatic treasures," said H.E. German Ambassador Georg Luy during his opening remarks, "but they are at risk from pollution, urbanization, industry and agriculture," he added. Parks lack access to adequate funding and enough qualified rangers to roam those wide stretches of land. As a result, they are often left vulnerable to dangers such as indiscriminate hunting, overfishing and pollution.

The Cairo Climate Talks brought together an expert from the government, a senior ranger, a university professor and an ecolodge owner to discuss how to more efficiently conserve and sustainably develop these habitats to provide opportunities for education, tourism and local communities.

"God created beauty, put it in a basket and laid it in Ras Mohamed," emphatically declared Dr. Mostafa Fouda, current advisor to the Minister of Environment, who oversaw the protectorates as head of the Nature Conservation Sector for many years. Ras Mohamed, located at the southern tip of the Sinai peninsula, became the first Egyptian protected area in 1983, and Fouda contributed to officially recognizing the beauty of the site's rugged mountains and the biodiversity of its colorful coral reefs and endemic fish species. "Before joining the nature conservation sector, he said, I was an academic so I taught, did some research and a bit of community service. Then once I joined the government, I had to deal with investors and all kinds of people, and it became hard to keep a clear vision." To 'sell' ecosystem and biodiversity conservation to investors, Fouda said we need to focus on the economic benefits, such as revenue mechanisms and job creation.

The opening of Egypt's first climate change museum and excavation of whale fossils in Wadi el-Hitan, is a success story for attracting international cooperation and generating income for conservation. The 200-kilometer-squared UNESCO world heritage site in Fayoum's Wadi Rayan Protected Area is home to some of the earliest whale fossils discovered worldwide. "We have whales in the desert. Egypt is a country of miracles," said Mohamed Sameh, a senior ranger, geologist, paleontologist and deputy manager of the site. The fossils provided the first conclusive evidence that whales evolved from land-based mammals. Sameh also highlighted how a five-degree temperature increase changed this area completely from sea to desert and the lessons it has to teach us

about climate change.

Education is key in raising environmental awareness and protecting our natural resources, said Dr. Kohar Garo, a professor of Zoology at Cairo University and a member of Nature Conservation Egypt, who ran a project in Fayoum to teach children about indigenous and migratory birds and the human impact on their habitat. “Fayoum Governorate is one of the richest in terms of flora and fauna, but the people there are some of the poorest,” she said. Lake Qarun, this giant expanse of water, has fallen victim to intense pollution, and litter is everywhere. Using games, plays and educational materials to spark the children’s interest she said, “If you teach a child, there will be a trickle down effect at the level of the family.”

Sherif el Ghamrawy, the owner of Egypt’s first ecolodge, Basata, believes that ecotourism should work in parallel to environmental protection, if done right. He and other ecolodge owners are currently working with the Ministry of Tourism to launch Egypt’s first Ecotourism Council, that would act as an umbrella covering all ecotourism activities across Egypt and develop standards. He also founded Hemaya, an NGO that partners with the local community in Sinai to collect trash from 60,000 residents, hotels and camps from Taba to Dahab. “As an Egyptian living in the Gulf of Aqaba, I felt it was my responsibility to start educating people on solid waste management, that’s why I created Hemaya.” This NGO also hires local Bedouins as rangers to protect the coral reef and to prevent illegal fishing. According to Sherif, involving the local communities in the protection of national parks is essential. Volunteerism should also be employed to engage more people in environmental protection “What did our government do to take the power of young people away?” he asked.

According to him, there is still a long way to go for the protectorates to actually be protected, and while rangers are doing “a fantastic job”, they are not supported as they should be. Dr. Garo added that she designed a two-week crash course and submitted it to the minister of environment that trains young graduates on how to become rangers, however it has not been implemented.

El Ghamrawy suggests two ways to bring more revenue to the national parks: “First, you need to attract local and foreign scientists to conduct research in some protected areas — that could be the first stream of revenue,” he said. Ecotourism could provide the second revenue stream, but it needs to be tailored to sensitive environments. “You need to do your homework and figure out the maximum carrying capacity of your park,” he added. Thousands of people allowed in a park in one day would be destructive to the surroundings and counterproductive, he said.

Echoing the words of H.E. Julius-Georg Luy in his opening speech, Dr. Fouda concluded: “We can’t live without nature, but nature can live without us.”

Background Information:

The Cairo Climate Talks are conceived, organized and hosted as a cooperation between the German Embassy in Cairo, the Egyptian Ministry of Environment, the German Science Center (DWZ), the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) and the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ). For more information, please visit our [website](http://www.cairoclimatetalks.net) or contact press@cairoclimatetalks.net.