

Preservation of the Land and Landscape - Theory & Practice

Yoav Sagi

The Open Spaces : current situation.

Land reserves , the landscape and the open spaces are a central issue in our lives, whose importance stems from the fact that almost all aspects of our lives are linked to and based upon the land.

The open spaces - that is to say those that are not fully developed - are important as a source for life - for food, for the preservation of biological diversity, landscape diversity and historical heritage, as an open area for recreation and tourism without which a healthy and stable society could not exist in an urban , industrialized country. In Israel today, which suffers from a severe shortage of land reserves , the issue assumes yet greater importance.

The major reasons for the severe shortage of land reserves and open spaces lies in Israel's small dimensions and relatively large population. Immigration absorption and a high natural growth rate have led to the population growing by one million per decade over the last 4 decades: growth which is expected to continue at approximately the same pace in the future.

Population density already exceeds 500 person per sqkm in the area north of Beersheba. Projections for the year 2020 predict the figure rising to 850 - a figure over twice as high as the (stable) population density of Holland (366 per km), considered the most densely populated western country.

These figures, due in part to unavoidable facts and in part to accepted national policy and the development needs which follow, pose tremendous pressure on the remaining open spaces - the pressure to develop every last remaining square inch of open space, to pour concrete and tarmac over the last few open areas.

Thus, when one considers the fact that land reserves and open spaces are amongst the few resources impossible to manufacture or recycle, land reserves in Israel are our most rare and precious resource. Our policy must therefore be to use as little land reserves and open spaces as we possibly can.

Theory...

Principles of policy required for the efficient and least wasteful use of land resources were developed by the DESHE team (synonym for "Image of a Landscape" in Hebrew) - a think tank on the integration of development needs and the preservation of the open spaces which began operating in 1991. It's main recommendations were as follows:

Classification of the open spaces:the remaining open spaces will be classified according to the importance and sensitivity of their nature and landscape values, according to which their suitability for conservation , building or monitored development shall be determined.

We have adopted the approach that is not enough to define which areas are to be totally preserved - we must, urgently , define those areas where it is possible to build immediately - with minimal restrictions - in order reduce the pressure on the sensitive open spaces.

We also need to define "intermediate" areas, in which monitored development may be carried out. Present-day conditions do not enable the preservation of the landscape in all its varieties. Only within the limited framework of the areas protected by law-

nature reserves and natural parks. We must ensure that development in unprotected areas will preserve the landscape's characteristics. Therefore, we have to define each landscape "unit" 's characteristics, and to suggest if and how it may be developed.

The procedure of analysis and classification of the open spaces is not a new one, but in order to keep up with the pace of development - set by the need to absorb immigration - it had to be speeded up. Thus all the open spaces in Israel were mapped (primary mapping) by the Nature Reserves Authority , the JNF and the SPNI , according to the standards set by DESHE team.

Distribution of the population, settlements, building and development.

Preservation of the open spaces must be a major consideration in population distribution , from which the following guidelines follow:

* The Beersheba area and the Northern Negev settlements have relatively large land reserves, and landscape and ecological sensitivity is low - thus population should be directed to this area rather than sensitive areas like the Galilee region, the Judean hills and the populated central region. It is needless to say that employment must be found and a high standard of living offered.

* The establishment of new settlements should be avoided , especially village type suburbs. Existing settlements should be developed - both enlarged and developed more densely.

* Wasteful building of one-story cottages should be minimised and diverted to village type settlements and existing suburbs.

Building density In order to make the most efficient use of the limited land resources, building density in settlements must be increased, whilst of course protecting the environment. Thus, amongst others, building upwards should be considered, and enlargement of the saturated built up areas in existing and planned settlements. Built up areas and public parks should be designed holistically (the team's approach reflects the change taken place in the traditional environmentalist approach, due to the prevalent situation).

The level and type of development will be determined according to maximum alignment with the landscape, so as not to damage its main characteristics and the environmental resources. Infrastructural facilities will be considered and efforts made to coordinate their establishment.

This policy , which enables saving land reserves, should guide planning, should guide legislation and most importantly should direct the national investment of resources to create the infrastructure for economic and social development. The correct redirection of resources is of prime importance for without it the planning and policy principles could not be followed. These matters assume even more importance in our situation, where a drastic change in planning approach is needed. A change from widely distributed planning, building, and "conquering the land" approach which was of paramount importance in Israel earlier this century, to the "preserve the land" approach needed today.

... and Practice

The character of the Israel's policy and the policy of the planning and development bodies stands in complete contrast to the policy needed.

Instead of carefully saving the land resources, they are thoughtlessly wasted. Instead of carefully saturating existing building and concentrating it in existing settlements, new suburbs and settlements of land wasting cottages are being built everywhere.

Infrastructure is being laid up and down the length and breadth of the country, as though limitless land reserves were at our disposal.

Instead of preserving the land, the prevalent approach is still that of conquering it.

Continuation of this policy will leave us with a solid block of tarmac and concrete in the center of Israel - with dire consequences for the environment and the quality of life.

Thus the few remaining open spaces, with their nature values, landscapes and historical heritage, are disappearing. The country's special image is changing and the last "green lung", vital as the air we breathe, vanish under concrete and asphalt.

The Ashdod Sands are the last remaining area where a complete coastal landscape unit survives: a beach, sand dunes, stable sands. It is after a decade long bitter struggle that we were able to save it from total destruction: its preservation, however it is not yet secured by legislation, and almost every day new plan to build on the sands appear.

An ongoing struggle is that to preserve the **Mediterranean coastline**. If we are unsuccessful, each open space will turn into a marina - which not only damages the beach due to building docking facilities, but also prevents the public from reaching the beach, selling the area as hotels and apartment complexes for the rich.

More than five new settlements are planned in the Jerusalem hills, all unnecessary. If we would like to keep at least some open spaces and clean green "lungs" These settlements must not come to be.

The struggle goes on in the **Judean desert**, where the Dead Sea works can still do as they wish, upon an area of 3% of the area of Israel.

In **central Israel** almost no open areas remain. The use of open spaces to build suburbs continues. In the **Galilee** the pressure to establish unnecessary new settlements is relentless threaten to cover every piece of land.

In addition there are many new roads being planned and built - The most important one being route no. 6: a road planned with no overall transportation planning, it will cause severe environmental damage. The road is much too large for the country's need.

The Israel Land Authority, instead of setting long - term policy which would ensure the preservation of Israel's landscape and promote the well being of its population, encourages the selling off of the open spaces for building and development, with the support of the Treasury and the Ministry of Housing.

The ILA has begun recently marketing unplanned areas for the construction of tens of thousands of housing units in central Israel.

Another threat looming over the remaining open spaces is that of the government arrangement to solve the Kibbutz'im financial crisis within which Kibbutz agricultural

lands are to be turned into economic resources, by changing their status and enabling their development for housing.

One fifth of the country's area north of BeerSheba is already covered by concrete and asphalt. If present trends continue, over one half of the area will be covered by the year 2020. If we do not change our approach, the entire central region of Israel, between Jerusalem, Ashdod and Nazareth will turn into one huge Megalopolis city and we will see for ourselves the nightmare of "a country of concrete and cement".

What more can we do to convince decision - makers that development is not an end unto itself, but a means to improving quality of life? That for our well being, and for the well being of the generations to come, we need policy that protects the land instead of setting out to destroy it? Will we be convinced only when the last open spaces is gone?

We do not want to - nor are we allowed to leave behind us a concrete jungle. We can and should fulfil the development needs, the needs of economic growth and immigration absorption, whilst preserving the landscapes and its values. Development and preservation do not contradict one another. It is only a well thought out combination of both that can fulfil the one true aim of development, which is the main aim of preservation - improving the quality of life of both the individual and society as a whole.

We have to change the approach and stop the mad rush to develop anywhere, anytime, and at any price. Preservation of the landscape and the land reserves must be one of the main guidelines in planning and development policy. The principles for the preservation of the open landscape, as developed by the DESHE team and outlined previously, must be implemented.

We must formulate national policy to preserve the open spaces and land reserves immediately.

We must prepare a plan for the future transportation system in Israel which will take into consideration environmental factors, the need to use land reserves sparingly and the need to encourage public transportation.

We must stop localized, impulsive short sighted planning and development and to ensure that everyone without exception obeys planning and environmental laws.

Israel's government, and those in charge of the tourist industry must understand that real development of tourism is not measured by the number of hotels and rivieras we have.

If we won't preserve Israel's image, no tourists will come to Israel and Israelis themselves will have to go abroad to seek the open spaces.

To achieve our aims we must bring about a complete change in the approach and the direction of development: in order to help achieve the required change the **Council to Preserve the Open Landscapes** was set up several months ago. Hundreds of people from all sectors of society have joined.

The council operates in two spheres:

Firstly, creating public awareness of the necessary change. Secondly, promoting development policy based upon the need to preserve land resources and the open spaces.

We are working to impliment the **development policy**, to be backed by suitable legislation and more considerate and thought out planning which will ensure that the decisions and implimentation will be guided by long term considerations, rather than by short term populististic ones.

The council's aim is to influence decision - makers to move from a policy of squandering land to one of saving land.