

Green Activism to Protect Forests in Jordan

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The collective effort to conserve our forests manifested in the campaign to protect Bergesh forest in northern Jordan is a positive sign of vitality of the green movement during the wave of democracy in the Arab region, or the so-called Arab Spring. Sustaining the momentum of the green movement in Jordan and listening to its demands are indicators of good governance that can ensure human livelihood, wellbeing and prosperity.

The campaign, led by civil society and local communities, to challenge a proposed development in Bergesh forest in the Ajloun area, sheds some light on the key role of the environmental movement in Jordan. This campaign aims to enforce the rule of law and bring a new discourse on sustainability in a green economy challenged by climate change risks and poverty.

It should be noted that the current development model, which is based on GDP, does not tell us the “ecological truth” about the value of our natural capital and the multiple ecosystem services like the provision of fresh water, air, food, energy, medicinal plants, ecotourism, and carbon sinks. All these ecosystem services are not captured by GDP and that is why our economic model suffers from blind spots that underestimate the value of forests and other ecosystem services. Globally, the estimated value of these ecosystem services was estimated recently to be 4 trillion US dollars per year.

This protest against the proposed development in Ajloun comes during the UN International Year of Forests in 2011, which is intended to celebrate people’s action towards sustainable forest management under the theme “Forests for People”. Success stories and best practices exist in natural resource management and the experience of Jordan is evident in the award-winning work by the Royal Society for the Conservation of Nature (RSCN) in Dana reserve and other sites. The International Year of Forests provides a means to show good governance in action and to bring voices together and build momentum towards even greater public participation in sustainable forest management. It is an opportunity to develop people-centered development models that benefit both people and nature. The Ajloun area can and should be one of these models, to be shared with the world.

The master plan for Ajloun, which cost 3.5 million JOD, needs to be the framework for ensuring sustainable development for a green Jordan, to preserve its tiny remaining forests that cover less than 1% of the country. Paradoxically, the proposed military academy in Bergesh is likely to induce spillover effects and externalities that will undermine the vision to develop Ajloun as a special zone that would provide local development, green jobs and benefits for the entire Ajloun area.

Ajloun's Bergesh forest is virtually the last area in Jordan that still has an intact ecosystem with a rich natural diversity of native plant and animal species. Ninety percent of the area is lush with vegetation. A recent ecological survey in a small part of the forest, in January 2009, recorded over 100 plant species, of which 13% are rare, 4% are threatened and 13% have medicinal value. Without an extensive survey, there is no telling how many more important species are also present.

The Bergesh forest is home to many indigenous animals and birds, including migratory birds, whose presence is essential to maintain balanced biodiversity. Some plants and animals found there are threatened at the national and/or global level and are thus in need of permanent protection.

I am pleased to see a high level of responsibility and awareness among all environmental groups in Jordan. It is clear for them that there should be no conflict between economic development and protecting forests and natural resources, since human and environmental security are interconnected and we cannot invest on a dead planet. The campaign to protect Bergesh forest is not an anti-development movement. On the contrary, the opponents are looking for genuine win-win solutions that benefit both people and nature.

The key message is that the all relevant laws, which clearly state, define and clarify the mandate to protect natural resources, need to be respected.

Article 28 of the agricultural law specifically prohibits selling or allocating forest land to any person or entity, for any reason. Article 35 of law states that it is prohibited to cut down/destroy/harm any forest trees, perennials, or rare and endangered wild plants.

Due process and public hearings are to be institutionalized. And the environmental conventions ratified by Jordan are to be honored.

In sum, policy makers, youth, and the public and private sectors need to understand the value of forests. Conventional wisdom states that "we will conserve only what we love, and we will love only what we understand". We need to understand that a forest is much more than just trees. A forest is a medical center, a playground, a power station, a tourist attraction, a stress reducer, and a school classroom. We are responsible for, and entrusted with, keeping this infrastructure for our grandchildren.