

Yarmouk Protected Area

A Timeless Oak Treasure

Yesterday, today and tomorrow

In August 636 AD, as the Mediterranean breeze attempted to provide relief from the hot northern Jordanian sun, a Muslim commander of the Rashidun Caliphate achieved legendary status when his small army defeated the much larger forces of the East Roman-Byzantine Empire at the Battle of Yarmouk, changing the course of human history forever. Almost 1400 years later, The Royal Society for Conservation of Nature (RSCN) declared 20.5 km² in the Irbid Governorate as the Yarmouk Protected Area so that countless future generations will be able to join its historical and natural significance.

Nature's Heartbeat

For the nearly 29,000 people who live in the vicinity Yarmouk's soil is their lifeblood. While many people are employed by the government or military, numerous others rely on agriculture – especially olive cultivation – for income. The area is one of the most fertile regions in Jordan and the Yarmouk River, which is the least polluted of Jordan's rivers, continuously feeds the soil with essential nutrients, resulting in delicious fruits and vegetables that are eaten throughout all of Jordan.

Some Species' Last Hope

From the wetland riverbeds to the rolling hills, the lush landscape also provides a rich diversity of habitats for countless plants and animals. Over 16 species of large mammals, including the caracal and mountain Gazelle, have been recorded and the Yarmouk River even boasts one species of endemic Tilapia fish. Yarmouk is home to 14% of all of Jordan's birds, making it an Important Bird Area and prime corridor for global migration. For many of these species, Yarmouk is their last hope: the Pygmy Cormorant, Marbled Teal, Griffon Vulture and the Brown Fish Owl are all threatened with extinction on a regional or global level.

Precious Forests

Currently, forests constitute about 1% of the total Jordanian land area, which means that the deciduous oak trees (*Quercus aegilops*) in Yarmouk are more than scenic landscape; they are a national treasure. Yarmouk is considered home for 85% of the deciduous oak trees in the Kingdom. Although the pattern of their growth is not seen anywhere else in the Kingdom, these national trees of Jordan were not on any other conservation list and their national and regional survival was severely threatened by logging and overgrazing.

Thankfully, on January 6th, 2010, the Council of Ministers declared Yarmouk to be a "Protected Area", ensuring that this national treasure would not disappear. At a time when our national forests are disappearing at a shocking rate, the largest regional deciduous oak tree forest is safeguarded within the Protected Area. Without its establishment, overgrazing and logging would have taken its toll on the Northern part of Jordan, stripping future generations from an opportunity to enjoy the beauty of an ancient oak tree.

By Jordanians, for Jordanians

Through the Integrated Ecosystem Management of the Jordan Rift Valley Project (IEM-JRV), RSCN has established the Yarmouk Protected Area to ensure the survival of many species, however, it is not only these plants and animals that benefit. Indeed Yarmouk is an area that is for Jordanians, now and for years to come. This is an area that speaks volumes about who we are both as a nation and as people, thanks to the conservation efforts of RSCN, it will continue to bear witness to our history for generations to come.

In addition to the conservation efforts paid in Yarmouk Nature Reserve, and since its establishment in 2010, the IEM-JRV project has involved and supported key stakeholders, local communities and villages surrounding the reserve including Malka, Mansoura, Um Qais, Al Mukhibeh Al Foga and Al Mukhaibeh Al Tahta. Through a number of development initiatives like rehabilitating the Um Qais tourism site, supporting local ranchers, schools and CBOs, Yarmouk Nature Reserve has gained local

support from the surrounding communities who appreciated the role that the reserve management plays in helping nature and people. Several income generating projects were also initiated by the IEM project like the soap factory in Malka and the Mushroom planting initiative.

Ecological Trails

Visitors can enjoy nature's wonders in Yarmouk Protected Area through walking the Muntamra or Sharif tourism trails, which both become a joint trail at the end, leading to the Mukhaybeh Al Tahta village.

Muntamra Trail

Description:

Distance: 6 km

Starting point: 400m above sea level

Ending point: 150m above sea level

Just beside the Sharif hill towards Ain Muntamra starts the Muntamra trail with a moderate slope. Visitors must walk cautiously using the contour track. Then it becomes easy to walk across the valley, where you can see the natural springs like Ain Muntamra. Visitors can enjoy the beauty and diversity of plant species like deciduous oak and carob trees spread along the hillsides of the valley as well as the wild animals' habitats and their footprints.

This trail allows visitors to see old mural inscriptions in some archaeological caves dating back to different eras. In this valley, there are also ancient ruins for old houses used by humans in different eras as well as stone quarries that were used by humans at that time as resources for stones.

At the end of the trail, visitors leave the valley walking across the hillside from the western part that overlooks the Golan Heights and the Galilee Lake until they reach the Mukhaybeh village.

Sharif Trail

Description:

Distance: 4.20km

Starting point: 400m above sea level

Ending point: 150m above sea level

The Sharif trail is considered an easy trail that suits all age groups. Visitors can pass through the deciduous oak forests on top of the western side of Yarmouk Protected Area that overlooks the Golan Heights, Al Sheikh Mountain and Yarmouk Valley. Visitors can also have a glimpse to the Upper Galilee Mountains like Tabour Mountain, Nazareth, Tiberias Lake and Um Qais Archaeological Site.

Walking this trail gives visitors a chance to see the rich diversity of plants like wild plants that are used in preparing traditional dishes that are known among local communities such as thyme and arum. This trail has different types of wild flowers like the windflower and the Black Iris, which the national flower of Jordan. Visitors can also learn about the history of the area through visiting the caves, old wells and human-endemic areas in ancient times.

Archaeological importance

Hunters and Gatherers

Hunters and gatherers were already present in the diversified limestone landscape of today's Yarmouk Nature Reserve in prehistoric times, more than 40,000 years ago. This is testified by flint-stone tools from the Old Stone Age, which were recently discovered. Some of the numerous caves have presumably been used in this time period already.

Flint-stone Quarrying, Late Stone Age

Around 9,000 years ago, flint-stone was quarried on the steep slopes and used to manufacture tools. Approximately 1000 flint-stone artefacts have been found so far; man-made tools such as sickle, drill and scraper (presumably pre-pottery Late Stone Age B). They date back to the transition from groups of hunter-gatherers to the first agricultural communities.

The Hellenistic-Roman city of Gadara

The Hellenistic fortress of Gadara on the crest of the hill came into existence around 200 BC, at the edge of a fertile plateau, in an outstanding strategic position. These good conditions as well as the connection to the intraregional road network under Roman rule, from the caravan

meeting point Bosra in the East to the Mediterranean harbour towns in the West, were the basis for the growth of the Roman-Byzantine city of Gadara until the 7th century AD.

Limestone Quarries

The numerous over ground stone quarries in Yarmouk Nature Reserve provided construction material for the Hellenistic-Roman-Byzantine city of Gadara. Many limestone and basaltic rock quarries, in which the construction material for Gadara's buildings, like the limestone blocks for the city wall (late 3rd/ early 2nd century BC), were quarried, are located here in Gadara's hinterlands. The ancient quarries can clearly be recognized by traces of quarry work.

The late Byzantine and Islamic periods

The establishment of the Byzantine Empire in the 4th century A.D. marked the beginning of a long-lasting period of peace, growth and economic prosperity in the region. As early as the 4th century Gadara became a diocese in the Holy Land.

The defeat of the Byzantine army by the Umayyads at the River Yarmouk in 636 A.D. meant the end of the Byzantine period. Following this, no new major building measures were undertaken in the city, nor was any damage done to existing structures

The devastating earthquake around the middle of the 8th century destroyed large parts of the city and interrupted the settlement's further development. After that, urban life declined and the population in Gadara became sparse. The former 'flourishing community' was replaced by agricultural and commercial structures and were situated mainly in the western part of the ancient city.

At the end of the 19th century, after a land reform under the ottoman government, the landowners built the village Umm Qays on the site of the ancient Acropolis settlement. It is characterised by enclosed architecture with courtyard houses, for example the Bait Melkawi, Bait Rusan, Bait Hisban, Bait Omari.

During the Six-Day-War in 1967 the strategic situation of the settlement hill again played an important role: several military bases were established, these are still visible today.

Contribute to Nature Conservation

- Take care of your country's nature; trees, animals and ruins...all of them.
- Listen to the sounds of nature and help keep the place serene and quiet
- Get to know the lifestyle of local communities, yet after seeking their approval and ask permission before taking pictures
- Contribute to the cleanliness of the area without littering
- The parking area is at your service; make sure to leave your vehicle there

About

The Royal Society for the Conservation of Nature (RSCN)

The Royal Society for the Conservation of Nature is an independent, non-governmental organization devoted to the conservation of Jordan's natural heritage. Established in 1966 under the patronage of His Majesty the Late King Hussein, RSCN and has been given the responsibility of protecting the Kingdom's biodiversity and wildlife.

Contact us

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