

History's Crossroads

Embassy helps save historic site

By Rose V. Lindgren, foreign affairs officer, Bureau of Near Eastern and Asian Affairs and former cultural affairs officer, U.S. Embassy in Beirut

In the UNESCO-protected Jabal Moussa bio-reserve in Lebanon, an ancient Roman road traverses a region having at least 728 floral species, 25 mammal species and more than 137 bird species. The reserve's Valley of Adonis, which is on the list of tentative UNESCO World Heritage Sites, was once a crossroads for ancient human civilizations, a place containing evidence of human history starting from the Middle Paleolithic period. One scholar sees the valley as a place where all civilization epochs are depicted, "allowing a complete sequence of human history."

It should be no surprise, therefore, that in 2015 a U.S. Ambassadors Fund for Cultural Preservation (AFCP) grant from the U.S. Embassy in Beirut has helped the Association for the Protection of Jabal Moussa (APJM) preserve and protect the biosphere's cultural heritage. An outgrowth of that grant was the ambassador's inauguration of a new cultural trail in the Valley of Adonis.

The AFCP supports the preservation of cultural sites and objects and traditional cultural expression in more than 100 developing countries. Grants are awarded in an annual worldwide competition involving projects proposed by the host country and selected by the U.S. Embassy in that nation. Projects can include the restoration of historic buildings, conservation of rare manuscripts and museum collections, preservation and protection of archaeological sites and the documentation of vanishing traditional crafts and indigenous languages. Embassy Beirut's AFCP grants have totaled \$1,100,000 since 2003.



The team cleaned this Roman inscription, at upper left, by clearing away nearby bush and tree limbs, to let the surface receive sunshine.

Photo by Rose V. Lindgren

At the inauguration of the Jabal Moussa project, Ambassador Elizabeth Richard said the mission worked with Lebanon's directorate general of antiquities to identify endangered sites. The post's restoration projects have included the Jeb Jenine Bridge, the Anjar Public Bath, Byblos Citadel and Al Mubarakheh Tower in Old Tyre. "We embraced these projects because of our belief in the importance of preserving, remembering and learning from our shared history," Richard observed.

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Gathered at the reserve's entrance are, from left, Lebanon's minister of culture and its minister of administrative reform, APJM's president and Ambassador Elizabeth Richard. *Photo courtesy of APJM*

This is not the first U.S. investment in Jabal Moussa. In 2011, the Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI) supported a project promoting traditional food production and handicrafts there, and in 2012 USAID provided training and equipment for tree nursery improvement under a reforestation initiative. In all, from 2014 to 2016, USAID supported three small grants to promote economic investment in the region, focusing on cherry production, bee cultivation and rural tourism.

By underwriting the creation of a trail along the area's old Roman road, though, Embassy Beirut's latest grant took Jabal Moussa in a new direction. The trail supports the area's cultural heritage to further economic development and local identity. APJM says that 1,422 people had already visited this trail even before its official inauguration, 963 of them under 16 years of age and 342 of them dining at an APJM guesthouse.



The team clears brush and dirt from a site that was found to be about four times as large as initially assumed and probably has another unexplored level below the surface.

Photo courtesy of APJM

The AFCP grant also funded cleaning and restoration of select sites in the biosphere, including those on the Roman road, as well as a temple at Mashnaka and two Roman religious sites, at Qornet el Deir and Qornet el Mzaar.

The Roman road was the path upon which generations of Romans and Ottomans traveled between the Mediterranean and the high plains of Lebanon's interior. Along it are stone inscriptions from the Roman Emperor Hadrian (117CE to 138CE) that were also restored by the AFCP grant for public

viewing. The inscriptions designated several types of trees—cedar, cypress, juniper and oak—as under Emperor Hadrian's protection, explained APJM Project Manager Daniela Doumet, who holds a master's degree in managing archeological sites.

Preserving these ancient inscriptions is particularly urgent because some of them are subject to weathering and erosion, and some have been seen by locals as indicators of the presence of gold. These residents have used dynamite to search for that treasure.

Concerned about human disturbance of the bio-reserve, APJM first installed a small guard shack with flyers and maps for visitors. When villagers burned the shack down, APJM rebuilt it, only to have it vandalized and burned again. Local villagers were upset at the bio-reserve designation because it limited their use of the area for grazing, hunting and planting.

APJM has since won over the villagers by noting the project's benefits and emphasizing economic development activities to provide an alternative to farming and hunting. APJM has trained and employed local youth as guides and now uses the guard shack to sell local jams and spices to visitors. Locals, in turn, helped APJM volunteers find new historic sites and, in a recent local election, a local leader came forth who strongly supports the bio-reserve and APJM.



The author visits the Machnaka site during its cleaning and restoration.
Department of State Photo

The world's people want to protect their cultural heritage, and in Lebanon, Embassy Beirut works with the ministry of culture to identify key sites and determine their urgency and importance. In a country where distrust of the government is high among civil society, the strong collaboration among the embassy, ministry and APJM serves as an example for other projects. It also shows the embassy's investment in peace and cultural understanding in this nation. ■

This aerial photo, taken before the site was cleared, shows the ruins of a medieval convent on the hilltop. Many Roman-era ceramic shards were also found in this area.

Photo courtesy of APJM

