

Jabal Moussa shows value of conserving heritage



Finbar Anderson | The Daily Star

BEIRUT: As the Jabal Moussa Biosphere Reserve celebrated the opening of a new hiking trail Thursday, officials said they hoped the reserve would demonstrate the value of protecting their natural heritage. “We would like to promote Lebanon as an ecotourism destination for overseas countries and for foreigners, and even for Lebanese,” said Christelle Abou Chabke, communications and ecotourism manager of the Association for the Protection of Jabal Moussa. “Lebanese don’t know what they have in their country, which is so sad.”

Pierre Doumet, the association’s founder and president, said that the impetus to protect Lebanon’s natural heritage would come down to “local communities that decide they want to protect their local area, and that it’s too important not to lose what came down from their forefathers and not to lose what we have received over thousands of years ... In one generation we can lose everything.”

The association is not only trying to conserve nature, Abou Chabke said, “we’re also conserving the cultures and traditions that exist in the seven villages of Jabal Moussa.”

The inauguration of the latest trail, which connects all the reserve’s trails together in a full loop, coincided with the association’s 10th anniversary. The reserve, 50 kilometers northeast of Beirut, covers an area of 6,500 hectares and is part of UNESCO’s Biosphere Reserves Network.

Doumet described three central tenets to sustainable development that the reserve follows to encourage locals to continue applying themselves to the project.

Doumet's first tenet, ecotourism, brought 22,000 visitors to the reserve last year, and he believes more will visit this year. This, in turn, helps boost local economies – the second tenet. Forty local women work at the reserve, making artisanal products, including souvenirs, and foodstuffs like jam and zaatar. Guests can stay at a number of local guesthouses and eat at the nearby restaurants. Many locals also work in the reserve as guides.

Finally, the reserve helps reclaim Lebanon's lost nature. It hosts three nurseries, which breed seedlings of rare trees to be planted in areas around Lebanon under the Lebanon Reforestation Initiative.

Tourism in Lebanon is threatened, Abou Chabke said, in part because of very visible environmental issues. "Everyone knows about the trash crisis," she said. "We're trying to show from our side the other aspect of Lebanon ... [The crisis] ultimately affects us – less foreigners visit us."

Doumet emphasized the reserve's importance in protecting nature from such threats as the culling of forests, the hunting of animals and quarrying. Lebanon, he said, has "incredibly good and effective laws" to protect the environment, but "there is no enforcement – this is a big issue."

The lack of enforcement, he said, was due to "a lot of weaknesses in governmental enforcement agencies." This again brought Doumet to the importance of persuading locals to fight for the environment.

He said he hoped that local people would "get so convinced that it's worth protecting their own heritage that they will make a big effort to do it themselves."
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