

A Bird's Eye View of the Holy Land

Newsletter From Israel | No.9 | Winter 2010



The Sinai Rosefinch is one of the most prominent birds in the Israeli desert and is a colorful attraction against the yellow background of the desert. In the photograph the Rosefinches are seen next to a water source in the Eilat Mountains. Photo: Thomas Krumenacker

Dear Friends,

Here we are again after a year of intensive activity. You can read all about it in this newsletter. On 26 January we held an event, attended by many people, at the Knesset in Jerusalem, under the auspices of the Speaker of the Knesset and the Environmental Protection Minister. We launched a new enterprise to decrease the use of pesticides in agriculture.

On the same day we held the opening of the new Visitor Center at the Jerusalem Bird Observatory, in the Knesset Gardens, in the presence of the Mayor of Jerusalem.

On 15 December, during the Hanukah holiday, we celebrated the 30th anniversary of the Annual Birdwatching Study Day. In 1979, 35 people attended the first Study Day and this year 1100 bird lovers packed the lecture hall!

Our cooperative activities with the Palestinians and the Jordanians on the use of Barn Owls and Kestrels as biological pest controllers increased significantly. In Israel there are now 1700 nesting boxes of which about 800 have already been occupied by Barn Owls. The Ministry of Agriculture and the Ministry of Environmental Protection are providing financial support for this project to decrease the use of pesticides. We invite our friends all over the world to help us with these activities, every contribution will be accepted with gratitude plus a variety of products can be purchased (See page 8).

The 4th International Birdwatching Festival will be held in Eilat in March 2010. It is not too late to register for the festival and enjoy the spectacular bird migration and the desert birds at the beginning of spring in Israel.

We hope you enjoy the newsletter.

Dan Alon
Director
Israel Ornithological Center

Dr. Yossi Leshem
Director
International Center
for the Study of Bird Migration, Latrun

Society for the
Protection of Nature in Israel
Israel Ornithological Center



International Center
for the Study of Bird
Migration, Latrun



Tel Aviv University
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There were about one thousand nesting pairs of Griffon Vultures in Israel before the state was established. Now only about 60 pairs nest in the country. The Griffon Vulture is mentioned 28 times in the Bible and is an important symbol of the heritage of Israel. Photograph: Yossi Eshbol

The Israeli Knesset supports the protection of birds. 30 years of birdwatching in Israel



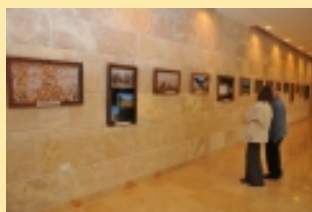
On 26.1.2010 impressive and varied activities were held in the Israeli Knesset, under the auspices of the Speaker of the Knesset, Mr. Reuven (Rubi) Rivlin. The event took place close to the Jewish festival, Tu Bishvat, the New Year for Trees, which is also the founding date of the Knesset. After the morning opening of the new visitor center at the Jerusalem Bird Observatory, which is in the Knesset Gardens, there was a discussion by the Internal Affairs and Environment Committee, chaired by MK David Azoulay with co-chairs of the environmental lobby of the Knesset, MK Nitzan Horowitz and MK Dov Chanin. Also attending the discussion were about 80 participants from government and public bodies, farmers and members of the Knesset.

The discussion dealt with ways to decrease the use of pesticides and poisons in agriculture. This was the result of intensive work done by the public committee chaired by the retired High Court judge, Jacob Tirkel, who, for several months, investigated the serious situation in Israel including 120 illegal poisonings in 2009. According to a report by the Israel Nature and Parks Authority, criminal charges were brought against only 3 of the cases. Five committees were set up: one that deals with the enforcement issues, led by former Police Commissioner Assaf Hefetz, the second deals with legislation and is headed by Dr. Jonathan Lester, the third deals with the subject of poisons and their effect on water resources,



The Environmental Protection Minister, Gilad Erdan, speaking to the 400 guests at the Knesset.

celebrate 30 years of birdwatching in Israel, since the Society for the Protection of Nature established the birdwatching center at Har Gilo. The event was attended by the Environmental Protection Minister, Mr. Gilad Erdan and chaired by the Speaker of the Knesset MK Rubi Rivlin. A film on the use of Barn Owls and Kestrels as biological pest controllers was shown. Prof. Yoram Yom-Tov presented the scientific and conservation dimension. The Efroni Choir,



Left: An exhibition, "Agriculture and Birds - Co-existence or Conflict", was opened after the event. It will be on show at the Knesset for two months. The frames in the exhibition are made of recycled, old windows and was made on the initiative of one of the bird photographers, Amir Ezer.

Right: From left: The Environmental Protection Minister and the Knesset Speaker unveiling the 3 new stamps.



Left: The Internal Affairs and Environment Committee chaired by MK David Azoulay. On right, Ret. High Court Judge Jacob Tirkel, on left MK Dov Chanin discussing the reduction of the use of pesticides.

Right: 400 guests attended the celebration at the Knesset. The Efroni Choir on the stage.

the land and wildlife and is led by Prof. Alan Schlosberg, the fourth deals with the influence of poisons and pesticides on the health of the public and is headed by Prof. Yoram Finkelstein of the Sha'arei Tzedek Hospital, and the fifth deals with education and awareness and is headed by a prominent T.V figure, Mr. Motti Kirschenbaum.

These activities began on the initiative of Dr. Yossi Leshem, Mr. Dan Alon and Dr. Ofer Bahat. Before the committee discussion began a colored booklet was prepared summing up the activities of the 5 committees was presented in the Knesset. The chairman of the committee summarized the meeting by emphasizing that he will act strongly in the Knesset in order to change the legislation and the enforcement and increase the education and awareness on the subject. The meeting was shown live on the Knesset channel and was viewed by about 100 schools all over the country. In addition to the committee meeting, there was an event in the Knesset auditorium to

conducted by Maya Shavit, sang songs about birds. Three new stamps were unveiled - each bears the picture of a different bird - the Hoopoe (Israel's national bird), the Graceful Prinia and the Goldfinch, the 2 runners up in the National Bird competition.

An exhibition, "Agriculture and Birds - Co-existence or Conflict", was opened after the event. It will be on show at the Knesset for two months. The frames in the exhibition are made of recycled, old windows and were made on the initiative of one of the bird photographers, Amir Ezer. In addition, bird paintings were exhibited from the Hula Valley Artists For Nature project that highlights the importance of this region to birds, wildlife and people.



The activities to reduce the use of pesticides are part of the International Year of Biodiversity.

A New Visitor Center at JBO, Knesset Gardens

The Jerusalem Bird Observatory (JBO) has three new and unique elements: the new Guttman Visitor Center, with the gallery in memory of Gail Rubin, and the bird hide which was renovated with support by the Berecha Foundation.

In the presence of the Mayor of Jerusalem and about 150 guests, the new building at the observatory was inaugurated. The building includes a Visitor Center, the first of its kind dealing with urban nature in general and Jerusalem in particular. The building is a "living building" with specially constructed walls with nesting places and habitats for different animals. The roof of the building is a garden, planted with native plants of the Jerusalem Hills designed to attract the insects and wildlife of the area. The gallery is dedicated to the memory of Gail Rubin, the photographer, who was killed by terrorists at Ma'agan Michael in 1978. This is the first gallery of its kind as it will be showing works of art connected with nature in general and urban nature in particular. The opening exhibition is of Gail's photographs. The well-known bird hide at the observatory has been renovated. The roof has been replaced and the walls have been mended to afford a pleasant birdwatching experience.

The Jerusalem Bird Observatory was established in 1994 by a group of nature lovers that adopted the birdwatching site, one of the last green sites left in the city. It is the first example of the development and protection of a natural site for the citizens of the city as it is situated in the heart of the city, covering about 1 ¼ acres. There are a variety of natural habitats that have always attracted thousands of birds and which are "refueling stops" for migrating birds. The observatory combines research and the monitoring of migrating and resident birds with enjoyable educational interaction between the researchers and pupils.

Around the ringing table the pupils have a close-up learning experience with one of the most amazing wonders of nature - the migration of birds. About 60,000 people visit the Jerusalem Bird Observatory each year and we hope that the renovations will increase that number in the coming year.

Dr. Leonid Dinevitch, the immigrant Russian scientist, retires.

In October 2009 Dr. Leonid Dinevitch, the scientist, retired from Tel Aviv University. Dr. Dinevitch had led the research conducted with the aid of the Russian radar system (MRL-5) that was erected at Latrun and contributed most significantly to the research on bird migration for



The Mayor of Jerusalem, Nir Barkat, and his Deputy, Naomi Tsur, watching a Bulbul, the symbol of the Jerusalem Bird Observatory, being ringed in the Knesset Garden, by Dr. Gidon Perlman. Next to Naomi is Amir Balaban, Co-director of the JBO.

the Air Force. The radar was brought by Dr. Dinevitch from the former USSR and was adapted from a weather radar to a bird tracking radar, and from an analog to a digital system. It has faithfully served the Air Force units by reporting warnings in real time. Until he arrived in Israel in 1991, Dr. Dinevitch, was in charge of a network of 47 weather radar systems, 5 airplanes, batteries of rain-producing missiles and 3600 workers. He will continue to work full-time on the project led by ICSBM for the Air Force sponsored by MAFAT, the Ministry of Defense, to reduce the number of collisions with birds.

In honor of his retirement, the International Center for the Study of Bird Migration and Tel Aviv University organized a celebration in the presence of the Foreign Affairs Minister, Mr. Avigdor Lieberman, the Minister of Immigration Absorption, Ms Sofa Landver, and the Deputy-head of MAFAT, General Yaakov Nagel. About 150 immigrant scientists from Russia attended the event and the ministers promised to continue the aid to our important project.



26.11.09, celebration of retirement of Dr. Dinevitch

Left to right: Immigration Absorption Minister, Sofa Landver, Foreign Minister, Avigdor Lieberman, Dr. Dinevitch and Gen. (ret.) Yakov Nagel.



1990 - Dr. Dinevitch as a general in the former USSR.

Pelicans and farmers - conflict or coexistence



About 50,000 Pelicans migrate over Israel in the autumn and spring. The drying of wetland habitats has caused fierce conflict with fish breeders. (Photograph: Yossi Eshbol)

The tens of thousands of Great White Pelicans that migrate over Israel twice a year form the entire European and West Asian population of the species. The pelicans, which feed mainly on freshwater fish, migrate thousands of kilometers from their breeding sites in Central and Eastern Europe to Sudan where they spend the winter in the Sudd Marshes, south of the Sahara. Research conducted in Israel shows that the pelicans have to replenish their energy resources in Israel as the maximum distance they can fly is 3000 km. without feeding and the distance between their breeding sites to Sudan is 6000km. For millions of years the pelicans had been replenishing their energy resources in the wetlands of Northern Israel, mainly in the Hula Lake which covered about 10 square kms. After the Hula and many other wetland areas were drained the pelicans were forced to search for food in the fish farms that were established all over Northern Israel. The fish farmers suffer enormous damages and as a result began a war against the pelicans. Everyone suffers - the pelicans are shot at and are under pressure to carry on their migration, and the fishermen suffer huge financial losses. The Society for the Protection of Nature in Israel and the Nature and Parks Authority have worked for years to provide stopover places with food for the pelicans so that they can continue their migration. Last year a decision was made to set up proper feeding sites in the Hula Valley but no solution has been found for the Carmel Coast area and this year about 5000 pelicans caused heavy damages to the fish farms there.

The Society for the Protection of Nature in Israel in cooperation with the Israel Nature and Parks Authority are now planning to establish a feeding site along the Carmel Coast. The feeding that was carried out during the last few years was not done in an orderly manner (see picture) and, even though thousands of pelicans enjoyed the food, the problem has not been solved.

Developing a Management Plan for Important Bird Areas in Southern Israel

In spring 2009, the Israel Ornithological Center (IOC) launched

a 3-year project focusing on the management of important bird areas in Southern Israel supported primarily by the U.S. Forest Service International Program's Middle East Program. This first year, beginning in March, we focused on the Arava with intensive field surveys, habitat mapping and building cooperation among the major stakeholders in this region. We are currently working on a management document for the Arava. Following this, the next two years will be devoted to the Western and Central Negev.

The aims of the project are: 1) to determine the present status of threatened bird species within the Arava and Negev Deserts; 2) to assess the different habitat quality and impacts to the ecosystems in these areas; 3) to develop a management plan that will provide a powerful tool for planners and conservationists in conserving these sensitive ecosystems; and 4) to update the original IBA scheme first published in 1994. This work will also form the basis of a standard monitoring tool to be expanded throughout Israel.

The survey examined the situation of the most sensitive bird species in the desert area of Israel. In the Arava the following species were defined: Hoopoe Lark, Arabian Warbler, Nubian



Hoopoe Lark in the Arava
(Photograph: Thomas Krumenacker)

Nightjar and Bar-tailed Lark. During the survey new areas were investigated and we found previously unknown nesting sites of the Hoopoe Lark and the Bar-tailed Lark. However the general picture is not good as the population densities of all the sensitive species have decreased significantly in comparison with the surveys conducted during the 1980's and 1990's. Further, confirmed indications of breeding of the sensitive species were very rare, and it seems that most of the birds even though present did not actually breed. The situation of the Arabian Warbler, which has already been classified in the Red Data Book of Israel as Critically Endangered, is even worse now and we found just a

few pairs. The Nubian Nightjar is found only in an isolated slat marsh patch south of the Dead Sea.

The massive development of agriculture in the Arava during the last decades, combined with 11 years of drought create a very difficult picture that we are hoping to improve with the activities that we are initiating together with our partners - conservation and development organizations in the Arava. In 2010 a similar survey will take place in the Western Negev along with continued specific surveys in the Arava to account for variation among years.

Chief of General Staff of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF), Lieutenant General Gabi Ashkenazi, and Officers of the General Staff during an educational activity at the Schiff House, Tel Aviv, October 16th, 2009



On the joint initiative of the IDF's Chief Educational Officer, General Eli Shirmiester and Dr. Yossi Leshem, the General Staff forum (26 Generals!) dedicated a morning to hearing about the 100 year celebrations of Tel Aviv. This included a visit to the Schiff House which has been recently renovated by Bank Discount and turned into a museum about Tel Aviv - past, present and future, a lecture by Tel Aviv's Mayor, Mr. Ron Huldai, regarding the 100 year celebrations, and Dr. Yossi Leshem on the subject of the IDF, nature and the community, with emphasis on birding and examining the significant development of the "Nature's Defense Forces" from the educational and practical aspects.

In our previous Newsletter (No' 8), we reported about the special Urban Nature project to ensure the future of the Common Swifts (CS), which arrive in Tel Aviv every spring to breed in the eaves of the old houses and are facing a severe risk

due to modern building and renovations.

The project was a unique cooperation among the SPNI, The FRIENDS OF THE SWIFTS Association, Tel Aviv City's Conservation Dept. and the Discount Bank, which also sponsored the project. It was carried out successfully in the unique 100 year-old building named the Schiff House, which was completely renovated by Discount and now serves as a special Visitor's Center for Tel Aviv history. Our installed C.C. Cameras provided live recordings and internet broadcasting of a swift family with 2 chicks from incubating, through egg hatching, growing up, their unique "push up" practice before leaving and of the maiden flight at night. A short film clip, called "Swift City", about the project is being shown to all visitors at the Schiff House and can be seen and downloaded. Check out the SPNI and the FRIENDS OF THE SWIFTS websites.



The Common Swift nests in Schiff House in the window shutters, and on-line cameras were installed in the Swifts' nests in order to broadcast the nesting process to visitors and the general public. The Common Swift is the symbol of Tel Aviv, the "White City", a World Heritage Site. Drawing: Tuvia Kurtz.



The General Staff forum in the Schiff House auditorium. Bottom right is the Mayor of Tel Aviv, Mr. Ron Huldai. (Photos: IDF spokesman)
The project is a joint venture sponsored by Discount Bank.



Dr. Yossi Leshem presenting the subject of birding, nature and environment to the General Staff forum while emphasizing joint accomplishments together with the Air Force, and the IDF's ability to switch attitudes towards nature, environment and education. The Commander in Chief, General Gabi Ashkenazi, is with the book "Flying with the Birds" which tells the story of his joint research with the Air Force, sponsored by Milken Foundation.



The 30th Annual Birdwatching Study Day, December 15th, 2009

During Hanukkah on 15.12.09, we celebrated the 30th Annual Study Day in the biggest lecture hall on the Tel Aviv University campus, the Smolarsh Hall. It was attended by 1100 birdwatchers from all over the country. We are very proud that the Annual Study Day has been held every year since its inception. The first Study Day was held on the old Tel Aviv University campus in the Zoology Department at Abu Kabir and there were only 35 participants!

This year's event was held in the presence of the Minister of Science and Technology, Prof. Daniel Hershkovitz and the Vice-President for Research and Development of Tel Aviv University, Prof. Udi Gazit. We had five guest lecturers from abroad: Prof. Ian Newton, OBE, from England, who is the world's leading scientist in the field of raptor ecology, Dr.

Marco Lambertini, CEO of BirdLife International, Prof. Hiroyoshi Higuchi of Tokyo University, Japan, who is known for his research in Asia on migration with aid of satellite transmitters, Dr. Fernando Spina from Italy who leads an international research project ringing a million Swallows, and Mr. Thomas Krumenacker from Berlin, Germany, a Reuters journalist and bird photographer who is writing a book about Birdwatching in Israel.

We would like to take this opportunity to thank the Discount Bank, Michael Federmann, Chairman and CEO of Federmann Enterprises and Dan Hotels, Moni Leiman, Sami Hazan and Anita Blum of the Mitzpeh Hayamim Hotel and the Ministry of Environmental Protection, who helped with the organization of this event.

Enjoying the White-headed Ducks at Hulda Reservoir.
From right to left: Dr. Spina, Prof. Newton, Prof. Higuchi and Dan Alon.



1100 people completely filled the Smolarsh Hall, at Tel Aviv University!



Two birdwatchers, from Germany and England, were given awards at the Annual Birdwatching Study Day, 2009

Since the inception of the Annual Study Day we have presented awards to people who have contributed significantly to the protection of birds in Israel and to the promotion of birdwatching in Israel. We would like to elaborate here on two award winners who are not Israelis, but whose contribution to birdwatching is so great that we decided it was high time they were recognized for their dedication.

Francis Argyle is a birdwatcher and one of the most experienced bird ringers in Britain. Francis has ringed hundreds of thousands of birds all over the world and has taught generations of bird ringers.

He first came to Israel at the end of the 1970's and is married to Nurit who is a graduate of the Society for the Protection of Nature's Field School. The couple lived in England for many years where they had a plant nursery. In the 1970's Francis was one of the first active ringers in Israel and his vast knowledge has taught and enriched many bird ringers in Israel. A few years ago Francis and Nurit decided to return to Israel and Francis now spends many months each year as a voluntary bird ringer in the Hula Valley. Francis draws and inspires many young bird ringers, including many children, to learn from his wealth of knowledge and experience. He spends long days at the ringing

station in the Hula and, with extraordinary devotion, has helped Nadav Israeli, the Manager of the Hula Ringing Station, to make it one of the most important ringing stations in the area.

Thomas Krumenacker is an outstanding bird photographer who works as a senior journalist for Reuters in Berlin. During a visit to Israel, as a journalist covering a visit of the German Foreign Minister, he discovered the unique birds of the country. He decided to spend much more time here and, after he fell in love with the birds and the country, he decided to write a book about the special birds of Israel. He is writing the book in collaboration with Jonathan Meyrav who is a senior birdwatcher of the Israel Ornithological Center of the Society for the Protection of Nature. Thomas has spent many long months in Israel. He has written wonderful articles about Israel and its birds for important newspapers in Germany. Thomas markets Israel as a birdwatching destination and as a place that he simply fell in love with and loves to return to when ever he can.

In March Thomas will be bringing a group of German birdwatchers to Israel. We hope that there will be many more groups in the future.



Thomas Krumenacker excited the entire audience with his great pictures (on his right Itai Shani, Director of the Hula Birdwatching Center)



The award is given to Francis Argyle in memory of Sergeant Major Motti Bachri, By Dan Alon.

Blackbird Project - Educational Cooperation Between Arab and Jewish Schools

With the help of an anonymous donation the International Center for the Study of Bird Migration at Latrun published a booklet with five lesson plans for elementary school students on birds in the garden, bird migration, Barn Owls and Kestrels as biological pest controllers in agriculture, Griffon Vultures that are an endangered species in Israel, and a chapter on birds in the Bible and the Koran. Eight Jewish schools and eight Arab schools all over the country joined the project enthusiastically. Birdwatching trips of one to two days are planned for the Arab and Jewish schools together and a Hebrew-Arabic-English dictionary containing 100 basic words has been produced to improve communication among the students. The booklet has been printed with the Hebrew pages on the right and the Arabic pages on the left. A DVD with many illustrations has also been produced. We are planning to hold a big event in May 2010 to celebrate the first year of activity.



The cover page of the Blackbird Project Booklet

A gold and a silver coin of the Hoopoe - the National Bird, minted for Israel's 61st Independence Day

At an impressive ceremony on 31 May, 2009 in Jerusalem two new coins were presented by the Bank of Israel, one gold and one silver, bearing the image of Israel's National Bird - the Hoopoe. The ceremony took place in the presence of the Governor of the Bank of Israel, Prof. Stanley Fischer. Earlier Prof. Fischer had spent a day birdwatching, observing the raptors on the Judean Plain, with Yossi Leshem and Dan Alon. He was impressed by the dozens of Short-toed Eagles that hunted the rodents and snakes that were uncovered by the plow in the agricultural fields. Prof. Fischer gave a lecture on the economic value of birds in Israel and the audience was most impressed by the "bird watching" Governor.

The modern version of prophet Isaiah "... and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks..." (Isaiah 2,4)

The Israel Military Industries donated 1000 ammunition boxes which were adapted to nesting boxes for Barn Owls and Kestrels. Motti Charter established a carpentry workshop on Moshav Ram-On in the Jezreel Valley, his study area, to change the ammunition boxes into nesting boxes. The Israel Defense Forces also contribute to the project as, from time to time, groups of soldiers come to work in the workshop, so they make a contribution to the protection of nature and to the community.



Soldiers contribute to the community by changing ammunition boxes into nesting boxes in the carpentry on Moshav Ram-On. (Photograph: Motti Charter)



The Israel Military Industries donated 1000 ammunition boxes that were adapted to nesting boxes for Barn Owls and Kestrels. (Photograph: Amir Ezer)



The Governor of the Bank of Israel, Prof. Stanley Fischer lectures on the economic power of birds and said: "...Yossi Leshem is mistaken, this year I went to the Hula Valley six times, not four times..."

This year, on Kibbutz Tirat Tzvi in the Bet Shean Valley (30 km. south of the Sea of Galilee), an online camera was placed in the nest of a Barn Owl that had laid 9 eggs. Five nestlings reached the fledging stage. The camera operated 24 hours a day, with an infra-red camera during the night. There were 240,000 hits on the site during two and a half months. The nest also drew the attention of the media as part of the national project in cooperation with the Ministry of Environmental Protection and the Ministry of Agriculture

Barn Owls raise between 3-13 nestlings in a nesting box, depending on the abundance of rodents in the agricultural fields. (Photograph: Amir Ezer)



Special offer for the spring migration, Passover 2010



Bee-eaters T-shirts
Painted by Walter Ferguson
All sizes, high quality, 20 US\$ including P&P



"The Man Who Flies With Birds"
Co-authored by Carole Vogel and Dr. Yossi Leshem, SPNI, is available in print now! 64 pages, full color. Order the book from us - 20 US\$ including P&P



Flying with the Birds - The updated edition of the book "Flying with the Birds" by Dr. Yossi Leshem and Dr. Ofer Bahat (272 pages, album format, 9X13 inches) \$36 including P&P



3 new stamps of the Hoopoe, the National Bird of Israel, and the runners-up, the Goldfinch and Graceful Warbler, with the first-day envelope which came out on 26 January, 2010. \$10 including P&P



Now the statue of the National Bird!

A new statue of the Hoopoe, the National Bird of Israel, standing on an olive branch, made by hand. Still cutout, printed by Serigraph, full color, by the well-known artist, Dudu Gerstein. 30X32X6 cm, both sides with colors. Price: Only \$184, including P&P for ASPNI members.



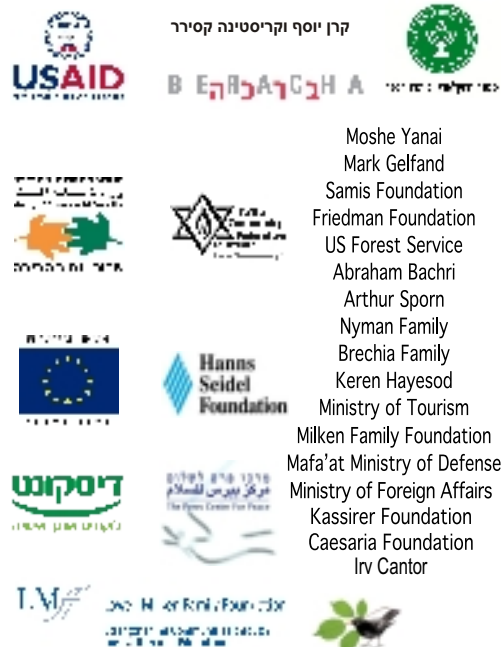
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