

Working for Lebanese IBAs

Title **To view the original PDF of this World Birdwatch article**, [click here](#). From its establishment in 1986, the Society for the Protection of Nature in Lebanon (SPNL, BirdLife in Lebanon) advocated the establishment of a national protected areas programme, and when Lebanon's Ministry of Environment was created in 1992, SPNL collaborated with IUCN to develop Lebanon's first protected area project. This involved three sites: Shouf Cedars, Palm Islands and Horsh Ehden forest, which were all declared Nature Reserves. Together with a fourth site, Ammiq wetlands, these were designated Important Bird Areas (IBAs) in 1994. SPNL supported the staff of the local NGOs who managed these protected areas by training them to monitor birds and organising study tours in Jordan, France and Tunisia. SPNL also helped to establish 'Bed & Breakfast' facilities, in order to diversify local livelihoods and increase incomes and employment. Between March 2005 and February 2008, SPNL and its partner A Rocha Lebanon identified a further nine IBAs. During the field assessments, SPNL and A Rocha made contact with interested individuals from surrounding communities. When the new IBAs were officially declared, these contacts were approached to nominate representatives from their site, to attend an IBA community workshop and form a Site Support Group (SSG). Site management committees were formed for sites without formal protection, with representatives from municipal councils and community leaders. The main role of these committees is to devise management plans for the conservation of their IBAs. Site Support Groups or Local Conservation Groups (LCGs) are community groups which strive to conserve IBAs through sustainable management of the sites. The SSG approach creates a constituency for conservation of the site, although the motivation of SSG members may derive from the economic, cultural, religious, recreational or livelihood supporting values of the site and its resources. Initially Lebanon's Ministry of Environment favoured designating all sites Nature Reserves, which calls for them to be maintained exclusively for conservation. This provoked opposition from communities who were used to benefitting from the natural resources of the sites, and as a result, protection was difficult to enforce. 'In Lebanon, it is neither feasible nor desirable to declare every IBA a formal protected area', explains SPNL's Dalia Jawhary. In fact, normal protected area designation can be counterproductive to conservation objectives, particularly where regulations restrict traditional land and resource use practices that are compatible with or contribute to the biological value of a site. In such circumstances, alternative approaches to site-based protection of IBAs are needed. These could include community managed conservation areas, or private reserves, through voluntary agreements with landowners, tribes and religious groups. In 2004, after twenty years of working with Nature Reserves through government agencies, SPNL initiated the revival of the hima practice, which had been prevalent in the region extending from West Asia to North Africa for more than 1,400 years. The hima is a traditional protected area system involving the sustainable use of natural resources by local communities, which indirectly benefits biodiversity. The hima system fell out of use in the latter half of the 20th Century, when countries in the region adopted other categories of protected area. 'In Lebanon, the word 'hima' resonates more positively in people's ears than the word 'mahmiah', which is used

to describe the conventional protected area?, said Assad Serhal, General Director of SPNL. ?This may be because the word hima is deeply rooted in people?s collective memory, and associated with a way of life without which survival would not have been possible. People are therefore conscious of the hima?s focus on human wellbeing, rather than the exclusionary wildlife conservation approach.? The goal of the hima revival is to mesh traditional practices with recent conservation science to achieve sustainable development. Since 2004, SPNL has re-established five himas, in three IBAs: Ebel es-Saqi in South Lebanon, Qoleileh/ Mansouri coastal area, and Aanjar/Kfar Zabad wetland in the Bekaa region. At Ebel es-Saqi, following extensive community consultations, the municipality agreed to declare the site a hima, and banned hunting in the sensitive area. An LCG was established, consisting of male and female volunteers aged between 18 and 35, with an interest in birds and sustainable use of natural resources. They were trained in bird identification, guiding techniques and recreational area management. A management plan for the site was developed in consultation with community members, and a committee has been selected by the community to oversee the management of the hima. Aanjar/Kfar Zabad wetland is the last publicly owned wetland in the Bekaa valley. The SSG has around 20 members, mostly aged between 18 and 30, and including a farmer in his 40s. They were selected by the mayor to reflect village and family affiliations. The aim was to support hima management and related activities, and to spread environmental knowledge and awareness. The wetland used to be a dump site for the village of Kfar Zabad. Now it is a recreational spot for local people, and an important water resource that feeds surrounding agricultural lands. Kfar Zabad SSG members were able to share their knowledge and experience with the environmental committee established by the nearby village of Anjar, and the two villages have developed a productive collaboration, based on common concerns related to their shared wetland resources. SPNL is now trying to involve older people in the SSG, since they are less likely to leave the area than the young, university-educated founder members. The marine hima at Qoleileh was established not only to conserve the biodiversity of this 4 km stretch of coastline, but also to help the community recover from the effects of the 2006 war, which left many families traumatised by death and injury, as well as destroying homes and infrastructure, and the means of livelihood such as fishing boats. The SSG consists of three groups, one of 15 fishermen, the second of nine women, and the third of five young scouts. The management of the hima is based on an agreement between SPNL and the municipality. Qoleileh?s fishermen were provided with two fishing boats equipped with nets, and trained in seabird identification. They now monitor birds, clean the shore, practice legal fishing and supervise the activities of visitors. Women play an important role in helping the fishermen reduce the pressure created by human activities, especially in their efforts to monitor the site, and through awareness campaigns on-site and in the village. As a result of Qoleileh?s success, the adjacent village of Mansouri has also declared its coast and beach a hima. Now SPNL is hoping to gain stronger support for the hima practice as a sustainable and culturally appropriate alternative in Lebanon and beyond. ?IBAs are about biodiversity, and himas are about people and sustainable use of natural resources? said David Thomas, BirdLife?s Head of Environment and Sustainable Development. ?By linking the two, the BirdLife Partnership has created a major concept in site based conservation.? SPNL finds the SSG approach has a number of benefits, especially reducing the workload of SPNL staff by increasing the ownership of conservation action at the local level. This is particularly important, as further IBAs are being identified. The SSGs are separate entities, with different kinds of membership, motivations and approaches, and no official network has yet been established. However, the sites are already sharing experience through exchange visits and meetings, which have attracted interest from other communities, leading to the establishment of new himas.