The involvement of Local Conservation Groups in IBA conservation in the Himas of Lebanon

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About this report

The Important Bird Area (IBA) Programme of BirdLife International aims to identify, monitor and protect a global network of IBAs for the conservation of the world's birds and other biodiversity. IBAs are key sites for conservation – small enough to be conserved in their entirety and often already part of a protected-area network.

Working in partnership with communities and other stakeholders at IBAs towards shared objectives of conservation and sustainable resource management is one of a range of different approaches being adopted by BirdLife Partners to help conserve IBAs. Working with people at IBAs helps to engage a mainly local constituency in IBA conservation. It builds on what are often strong connections – be they economic, cultural, historical – between people and the sites where they live, work and engage in recreation.

The way in which BirdLife Partners work with, coordinate and support individuals and groups involved in the IBA Local Conservation Group (IBA LCG) approach varies across the BirdLife network, reflecting the diverse contexts of the over 100 countries where BirdLife Partners are working. However, shared features include: the attachment to a particular IBA, a commitment to support the IBA’s conservation and sustainable use, a link to the national BirdLife Partner, and being compromised mainly of volunteers. In Europe these local volunteers are known as IBA-Caretakers, in Africa they are known as Site Support Groups, and other terms are used to describe them regionally and nationally within BirdLife.

Several BirdLife Partners are demonstrating success in establishing and coordinating Local Conservation Networks. This report is part of a project, supported by the Aage V. Jensen Foundation, which aims to capture, document and disseminate these experiences and the lessons learned from them.
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1. Introduction / Background

Ever since its establishment in 1986, SPNL advocated the establishment of a protected areas scheme in Lebanon. After the establishment of the Ministry of Environment in 1992, SPNL in collaboration with IUCN developed the first Protected Area Project in Lebanon (PAP) that involved 3 sites (Chouf Cedar, Palm Islands and Horsh Ehden). The project initiated in 1996 for six years, mandated a contract to be signed between the Ministry of Environment and local NGOs to undertake the direct management and supervision of each reserve. Before the end of the PAP, a Government Appointed Committee (GAC) was designated by the Ministry of Environment to supervise and support the fulfillment of the objectives of the management plan. This committee comprises representatives of the municipalities, the local NGO, academia, as well as other representatives from the local community. The execution of the management plan is the responsibility of a management team composed usually of a manager, an awareness officer, a guide and two rangers. It is important to note that only Chouf Cedar Nature Reserve is still run by the local NGO.

Four sites were designated as IBAs in 1994, namely: Chouf Cedar Nature Reserve, Ehden Forest Nature Reserve, Palm Islands Nature Reserve and Ammiq wetlands (3 of them were already nature reserves under the authority of the Ministry of Environment). Later on, SPNL’s relationship with the local communities came through a contract signed with the Ministry of Environment to undertake a national awareness campaign around protected areas in Lebanon. This resulted in SPNL working closely with the local NGOs and communities, and developing a number of awareness materials such as video documentaries, posters, leaflets and organizing nature festivals.

Officially, SPNL started to revive the IBA programme in Lebanon in 2002 under the patronage of the First Lady. Thus, Memoranda of Understanding were signed between SPNL and the local NGOs (Ehden, Chouf, Tyre, …). Since these agreements were was signed, SPNL has supported the reserves and local NGOs through training on bird identification to enhance bird monitoring in the reserves, establishing “Bed & Breakfast” facilities to diversify local livelihoods and increase incomes and employment, as well as organizing study tours in Jordan, France, and Tunisia. It should be noted that the management team of the reserves/IBAs has been the main beneficiary of these trainings, who are hired employees. Should SPNL decide to continue its relationship with these local NGOs, this might require supporting them in building their constituency, strengthening their institutional capacity and supporting them in engaging with different constituents of the local community, such as hunters, farmers and fishermen in the vicinity of the reserves.

The category for site conservation chosen by the Ministry of Environment was through Nature Reserves which calls for complete conservation. This approach has initiated opposition from local communities who are used to benefit from the natural resources. After twenty years of experience working with nature reserves through government agencies, SPNL initiated in 2004 the revival of the Hima practice that has been prevalent in the Arabic region for more than 1500 years. Currently, SPNL is working on the conservation of IBAs in collaboration with municipalities and local communities through the Hima approach (local community based conservation). However, the means of achieving this purpose have taken different forms, where in some cases SPNL aimed at changing behaviors and attitudes though awareness, empowerment and capacity building while in others by providing economically viable alternatives to destructive practices.
Nature Reserves and Himas represent the two categories currently used for protected areas management in Lebanon. They constitute two complementary approaches as the primary goal for nature reserves is to the conservation of special ecosystems and/or threatened species; while Hima’s goal is to promote sustainable use of natural resources. Below is a table that provides further analysis of these two approaches and highlights the characteristics and benefits of each category:

**Definition:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nature Reserve</th>
<th>Hima</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A government based...</td>
<td>A community based...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>...protected area...</td>
<td>...protected area...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>...managed for the conservation of biodiversity, natural habitats and/or ecosystems.</td>
<td>...managed for the sustainability of natural resources and systems...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>...and livelihood of communities depending on it.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Characteristics and Benefits of each category:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nature Reserve</th>
<th>Hima</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sustainable use</td>
<td>Sustainable use</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Controlled human activity is allowed</td>
<td>Controlled human activity is allowed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Range of human activities (fishing, grazing, habitat manipulation...) within control of carrying capacity</td>
<td>Range of human activities (fishing, grazing, habitat manipulation...) within control of carrying capacity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Managed by government</td>
<td>Managed by local community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Managed through Government appointed committees</td>
<td>Managed through Local elected committees</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Declared by law</td>
<td>Declared by decrees from local authorities-Municipalities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provides benefit to local people</td>
<td>Provides benefit to local people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limited benefit to local community</td>
<td>Limited benefit to local community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opposition and resentment from local communities</td>
<td>Gains support from local community</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
IBAs located on Government Lands could be conserved through strict IUCN categories such as Nature Reserves, whereas those IBAs located on Municipal, Tribal, Private or Religious lands could be more effectively conserved through the Hima-Community based conservation. Therefore, nature reserves and hima form complementary categories, both important for conservation and protected area management system in Lebanon.

The last years have witnessed the development of national projects where the institutional setup is comprised of consortiums of conservation NGOs each working on the management of a protected area. The main aim of such projects is to promote collaboration, exchange of experiences and networking for conservation, marketing and ecotourism. SPNL is currently involved in two such projects where several IBA sites are included.

2. Results of the IBA Research and Community Project “Identification and Conservation of New “Important Bird Areas” in Lebanon”

With generous funding from the MAVA trust, A Rocha Lebanon and the Society for the Protection of Nature in Lebanon (the Birdlife National Partner) have concluded the 3 year, science and community conservation project aimed at identifying and conserving new Important Bird Areas in Lebanon.

Prior to the project, four sites were internationally designated as Important Bird areas by SPNL and Birdlife International in 1994. These sites were; Ehden Forest Nature Reserve, Palm Islands Nature Reserve, Aammiq Wetland, and the Shouf Cedar Nature Reserve. Due to Lebanon’s importance for
migrating birds and species with a restricted regional or global range coupled with the intense, largely indiscriminate hunting in the country, it was essential to identify sites important for:

- roosting soaring birds where these birds fly low and are therefore vulnerable
- over wintering raptors and water birds
- breeding, over wintering and passage of species with limited regional or global distribution e.g. Syrian Serin

From March 2005 to February 2008, 31 sites were surveyed throughout the country, through a complete yearly cycle, with repeated visits during the main migration period. A total of 320 site visits were conducted by teams of researchers, totaling over 3000 hours of observations, generating thousands of individual records, representing tens of thousands of birds. All data collected was matched to BirdLife IBA criteria.

Following submission to Birdlife International, 9 new sites were designated as Global IBAs:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Newly designated global IBA Site</th>
<th>Birdlife Global IBA Criteria met</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hima Aanjar / Kfar Zabad</td>
<td>A.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lake Qaraoun</td>
<td>A.4.iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Riim / Sannine Mountain</td>
<td>A.3 and A.4.iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tannourine Cedars Nature Reserve</td>
<td>A.1 and A.4.iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hima Ebel es-Saqi</td>
<td>A.1, A.3, and A.4.iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Semi Deserts of Ras Baalbek</td>
<td>A.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beirut River Valley</td>
<td>A.4.iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upper Mountains of Akkar-Donnieh</td>
<td>A1, A2, A3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jabal Moussa Mountain</td>
<td>A.4.iv</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Relevant Birdlife Global IBA criteria:

A1. Species of global conservation concern:
The site regularly holds significant numbers of a globally threatened species, or other species of global conservation concern.

A2. Restricted-range species:
The site is known or thought to hold a significant component of the restricted-range species whose breeding distributions define an Endemic Bird Area (EBA) or Secondary Area (SA).

A3. Biome-restricted species:
The site is known or thought to hold a significant assemblage of the species whose breeding distributions are largely or wholly confined to one biome.

A4. Congregations:
iv The site is known or thought to be a ‘bottleneck’ site where at least 20,000 storks (Ciconiidae), raptors (Accipitriformes and Falconiformes) or cranes (Gruidae) regularly pass during spring or autumn migration.
Following submission to Birdlife International, 2 new sites were designated as regional IBAs:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Newly designated regional IBA Site</th>
<th>Birdlife Regional IBA Criteria met</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bentael Forest Nature Reserve</td>
<td>B.1.iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ramlieh Valley</td>
<td>B.1.iv</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Relevant Birdlife Regional IBA criteria:**

B.1.iv The site is a ‘bottleneck’ site where over 5,000 storks, or over 3,000 raptors or cranes regularly pass on spring or autumn migration.

Of the 11 sites declared, 2 are government declared nature reserves, 2 are conserved by SPNL in collaboration with local communities through the Hima approach, 3 have active conservation NGOs and 4 have no current protection. During the scientific field assessments, contacts with interested individuals from the community were established. Upon the official declaration of the new IBAs, these contacts were approached, asking them to nominate representatives from their sites to attend the IBA community workshop and form a site support group. Four, two day workshops were completed during the project:

- First day: an introduction on birds, their importance, bird ecology and bird identification skills.
- Second day: covered an explanation of the IBA programme, international criteria, conservation and monitoring procedures.

Site management committees were formed for sites with no protected area status, with representatives from the municipal council and community leaders in the region. The main role of these committees is the setting of a management plan for the conservation of the IBA. To help set priorities for the committees, the project produced site management statements for each site.

The Project marks the beginning in the conservation process for these sites, future plans include:

- Publishing simple, basic educational and training materials for bird identification training and IBA monitoring.
- Building up the national capacity for bird identification, research, and bird watching.
- Strengthening the scientific capacity of research staff at A Rocha and SPNL
- Concluding the national census for IBAs in country (several sites were not surveyed due to the 2006 war and security concerns).
- Developing monitoring schemes at each site and networking of the IBAs in country.
- Initiate conservation projects for the declared IBAs in collaboration with the local communities through the Hima concept.
- Monitor national development plans and advocate for the protection of the declared IBAs.

3. **The Linkage: IBAs, Himas, and SSGs**

    a) **The Hima System**

Ever since its foundation in 1986, SPNL has advocated the establishment of protected areas, and with the Ministry of Environment has initiated projects for protected areas in Lebanon. After twenty years of experience working in nature reserves with government agencies, with the increased concern at local,
national and international levels for co-management of natural resources, and the challenges facing local communities and the protection of private lands, SPNL is now reviving and advocating the use of the Hima system that was prevalent in the Arabic region for over 1500 years.

Since 1996, A Rocha Lebanon has been initiating conservation programmes with private landowners, local communities and religious groups in the west Bekaa. Additionally, it has worked nationally to engage religious communities in nature conservation and sustainable resource management.

The Hima is a traditional protected area system involving the sustainable use of natural resources by and for the local communities surrounding the Hima. Thus, indirectly benefiting the conservation of biodiversity as well as the natural and cultural heritage of the area.

Governance of Himas was initiated and handled solely by tribal chiefs in Arabia, and was later handed over to religious leaders, to ensure benefits to the underprivileged people in communities and within tribes. In countries of the Near East, such as Lebanon, this was later transferred to municipalities and other democratically elected bodies. This transfer ensured equity and the fair use of resources whilst sustaining the natural resources of the Hima.

During the last thirty to fifty years, most countries in the Middle East neglected the Hima system, and the region witnessed the advocacy and adoption of other categories of Protected Areas managed by governmental agencies.

SPNL has initiated the Important Bird Areas (IBAs) Programme in 1994. Four sites were identified by SPNL/BirdLife International, namely Ammiq Wetlands, Chouf Cedar Nature Reserve, Ehden Forest Nature Reserve, and Palm Islands Nature Reserves. But, over forty other sites were suspected potential IBAs and were under study by the SPNL / A Rocha scientific teams through the MAVA funded IBA Research project for 3 years (2005-2008).

The ultimate aim for the IBA programme is the conservation of these sites. We suggest that some IBAs would be best conserved through the Hima system-Community based conservation.

The limited ownership of the local communities within the current centralized system of protected areas has resulted in limited benefit sharing with local community groups. SPNL therefore, is hoping to gain stronger support for the Hima practice as a viable and sustainable alternative to nationally designated protected areas. The increased involvement of local communities and the benefits derived from protection will ultimately result in improved status of the natural resources themselves.

The overall goal of the Hima revival is to mesh traditional practices with recent conservation science as a way to reach sustainable development.

Since 2004, SPNL has re-established five Himas, in three key biodiversity areas; namely Ebel es-Saqi in South Lebanon, Qoleileh/Mansouri coastal area, and Aanjar/Kfar Zabad wetland in the Bekaa region. Since 1996, A Rocha Lebanon has been working with the landowners of the Ammiq Marsh using Hima principles to protect and restore this internationally important wetland. A unique project in Lebanon, the cooperation between private landowners and an NGO has created the country’s first private reserve which forms part of the agriculturally productive estate.
b) Why Hima?

*Because it provides an approach through which conservation can be linked to the community.*

IBAs are identified on the basis of biology and geography. Designation as an IBA does not mean that a site is, or should be, protected under any formal mechanism, neither does the list of IBAs in itself constitute a conservation plan.

In Lebanon, it will not be feasible or desirable to designate every IBA as a formal Protected Area. Resource limitation, conflicting land ownership and high opportunity costs in productive landscapes often make this difficult. Also, formal Protected Area designation may not necessarily be the most effective approach to site-based protection, especially where many people live in and/or use an IBA. Indeed, in some circumstances, formal Protected Area designation could be counter-productive to conservation objectives, particularly where current Protected Area regulations (i.e. Nature Reserves) restrict traditional land and natural 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 land owners, tribes and religious groups. They could be classified as Himas, thus complementing the Nature Reserve Category.

In many cases, the Hima approach may be cost-effective and help to engage support from sources not used or available to Nature Reserves. Hima status may also provide greater opportunities for sustainable human use of natural resources, and therefore, make a greater contribution to poverty alleviation for people whose use of natural resources forms a critical component of their livelihood strategies.

c) Why Himas are so important

The value of traditional practices and local knowledge is increasingly recognized by the conservation community worldwide. These practices represent both the values of local people and the wisdom they have accumulated through centuries of adaptation to their environment.

- They help alleviate poverty, empower local communities and support democracy.
- They have great pragmatic value for the conservation and equitable, sustainable use of natural resources.
- They are expressions of faith, morality and law, the roots of an environmental ethic.
- They help conserve key Biodiversity Areas (KBA), IBAs, and other landscapes outside the Nature Reserve Category (especially on municipal, tribal, religious and private lands).
- They provide numerous ecosystem goods and services, often contributing significantly to human livelihoods (e.g. fishermen, farmers, shepherds and collectors of non-timber forest products).
- They recognize the importance of local community organizations (Site Support Groups-SSGs) for in situ biodiversity conservation.
d) Site Support Groups (SSGs)

- IBAs are about birds and Himas are about people, biodiversity and sustainable use of natural resources. By linking these two concepts, the BirdLife Partnership has created a major concept in site based conservation.
- The IBA Site Support Groups – SSGs - are local community groups who strive to conserve IBAs through sustainable management of the sites. Such action brings grass roots engagement, community participation and results in improved livelihoods. It also creates a constituency for conservation and ensures the long term protection of the site.
- 'SSG" is a generic term used to describe groups of local stakeholders who share a common commitment for the conservation of an IBA.
- SSGs are networked together to promote exchange of experience and skills.
- The motivation of SSG members may derive from the economic, cultural, religious, recreational or livelihood-supporting values of the site and its recourses.

4. Case Studies about SSGs in Himas of Lebanon

Based on its long experience in protected areas, SPNL has chosen the Hima - community based approach for the conservation of IBAs. This entails the involvement of local authority-municipality, community leaders, establishing local committees, and Site Support Groups-SSGs. The process does not have guidelines or a recipe to be replicated. On the contrary, the specificity of each site has produced a specific case in itself.

a) Hima Ebel es-Saqi

SPNL activities in Ebel Es Saqi were initiated in April 2004, upon the request of Mercy Corps Lebanon - MCL- a relief NGO engaged in a multi-faceted development project in the South of Lebanon. A forested site was identified by MCL and the local communities for conservation. An initial plan was developed by the American University of Beirut prior to MCL’s involvement in the site that proposed the establishment of an ecological park, more so a public garden, in the forested area. As a donor for the execution of this plan, MCL solicited SPNL’s technical advice for its revision and restructuring.

SPNL undertook several missions to the site, before engaging in a surveying, planning, training and execution project. The particular situation of the site on the southern ridges of Mount Lebanon, the river flowing below the site and its neighboring orchards retained the attention of SPNL, for the site
presented exceptional characteristics. A bird census was undertaken that confirmed this area as a bottleneck site for migratory birds.

SPNL undertook extensive community consultations, not only through open community meetings, organized meetings and workshops, house visits but also by dispatching its staff on site for an extended period of time. As a result, the local municipality agreed to declare the site as a “Hima” and banned hunting in the sensitive area by municipal decrees. In addition to that, a group of 22 young people was selected through a process that involved open community meetings, questionnaires, objective selection through pre-set criteria, and interviews. The set criteria included: volunteer local individuals aged between 18 & 35 years old; resident in Ebel es-Saqi village; males & females; representing the community sects as much as possible; minimum education to high school leve; they should have free time to be allocated to the project; they should not have personal benefit; interested in birds, biodiversity, nature conservation and sustainable use of natural resources; and they should be interested in capacity building in the above issues).

The SSG members were trained on bird identification, guiding techniques and recreational area management. This group actively participated in the organization of the World Bird Festival in Ebel Es Saqi during the summer of 2004 and 2005. The international and national exposure these festivals obtained in the media, the number of participants and the diversity of activities undertaken strengthened the adherence of the local communities to the concept of the Hima.

This SSG was further formalized as an SPNL chapter for the conservation of Ebel es-Saqi. It is important to note that this region was under Israeli occupation for more than 20 years and people lost their sources of income. Thus, it was noted that the interest or hope to secure job opportunities was an important motivation to participate in the SSG or a hidden reason for initiating conflicts in the village.

A management plan for the site was elaborated in consultation with community members. Based on the guidelines and terms of reference provided by SPNL, a community committee has been selected by the community itself to oversee the management of the Hima, and three people selected from the trainees as the best candidates for the management team of the site.

b) Hima Kfar Zabad/Hima Anjar

The request came from the municipality to SPNL to study the site for an IBA designation, and conservation as a Hima, after the mayor and municipality members attended Hima Ebel es-Saqi bird festival in the year 2004.
Aanjar/Kfar Zabad wetlands is the last publicly owned wetland in the Bekaa valley, declared as an IBA due to the breeding of the Syrian serin. SPNL has been working on the involvement of the local community in Hima Kfar Zabad since the year 2004. The following initiative took place in Kfar Zabad upon the establishment of the Hima which concentrates through its approach on the value of local communities’ involvement in the general management. The SSG was established from around 20 members, who are mostly youngsters aged between 18 & 30, and including one member who is a farmer aged between 40 and 45. The SSG represents University students and includes males and females. The SSG members were selected by the mayor of the village with representation of the village affiliations and families.

The group was established by SPNL and the municipality with the aim of supporting Hima management and related activities and to spread environmental knowledge and awareness. Through the work with Kfar Zabad SSG, SPNL aimed to empower them and to raise their capacities so that they can be engaged affectively in the site’s management. The SSG of Hima Kfar Zabad undertook several trainings in order to raise their understanding of the value of the site and to equip them with the necessary skills for Hima management and eco-tourism development and promotion.

One of the major trainings which was given to the SSG was on bird identification and monitoring. This training reflected the value of the site and the importance of its protection as an IBA, where the SSG learned the necessary skills which feed into bird monitoring and identification. Since birds represent a major reason for the declaration of the site as an IBA, and instigated its protection, Hima Kfar Zabad SSG selected a name for their group which reflected this concept. The name was “Hima Bird”, which was linked to a logo which they chose, where the logo expressed a bird standing on a gun and preventing hunting. The following illustration reflected the SSG’s linkage to the IBA.

Hima Kfar Zabad SSG represents an active group who are interested in nature conservation and protection. Upon the establishment of the SSG, several meetings were held aiming to engage them in the activities, where they were divided into several committees according to their skills and interests (environmental education / eco-tourism / marketing and promotion). They have further elected a coordinator to represent the SSG and enhance cooperation with SPNL and the municipality. Communication with the local community is usually restricted to phone call and meetings during field visits as internet use is limited due to financial constraints and electricity cuts.
Being a part of an SSG motivates Hima Kfar Zabad SSG members, where this position gives them an effective role in the community and a chance to be heard, as well as a chance to produce an income from Hima activities (like working as guides in eco-tourism). Furthermore, SPNL tried to engage them in national and international trainings which boost their role and introduce them to the concept of environmental management on a wider scope.

The wetland area used to be a dump site for the village of Kfar Zabad. Now, Hima Kfar Zabad represents a major recreational spot for Kfar Zabad locals and SSG members, and a major water resource that feeds the surrounding agricultural lands which they and their families rely on for their living, thus this aspect gives them much more motivation to work on its protection. Also, putting Kfar Zabad on the international eco-tourism map gave the communities pride, and local and international recognition.

The management structure of Hima Kfar Zabad SSG took place through an agreement involving the municipal council, SPNL and the SSG, where the municipality agreed to delegate responsibilities to the SSG for the management of activities at the Hima, which concentrate on promotion of different eco-touristic activates and environmental awareness.

Hima Kfar Zabad SSG proved to be effective in organizing several events and festivals at Hima Kfar Zabad including the AEWA festival and the Bird Migration festivals. Moreover, they had a major role in spreading environmental awareness about the value of the Hima in their village. Also, they worked effectively on promoting and handling eco-tourism onsite.

Through the work in Hima Kfar Zabad, SPNL aimed to link Hima Kfar Zabad with the adjacent village of Anjar, hoping to spread the zone of conservation. Promoting the establishment of SSGs in other villages and providing a chance for Hima Kfar Zabad SSG to share their knowledge and experience of Hima management was a good approach for promoting Himas and for conflict resolution. Kfar Zabad SSG members were able to share their knowledge and experience with the environmental committee established from Anjar, through common meetings and activities in addition to eco-touristic visits. Also, Hima Kfar Zabad SSG were able to share their experience with other newly established SSGs in new Hima sites like Qoleilah and Hermal through exchange visits.
One of the major challenges which SPNL was facing through working with Kfar Zabad SSG is the age group, where the Kfar Zabad SSGs are mostly university students; thus there comes a time where they have to leave looking for a job in the city or abroad. SPNL is trying to resolve this problem through involving new members in the SSG who are aged from 30 and above, where their stable presence in the village is more ensured.

One of the major success stories which reflect the spirit of Hima Kfar Zabad SSG and their willingness to communicate their experience and knowledge in the management of Hima Kfar Zabad wetland was through the bird migration festival which took place on the 25 and 26 of October 2008. The festival took place between Anjar and Kfar Zabad village, and saw for the first time Kfar Zabad SSG working in collaboration with the newly established Anjar environmental committee on the organization of the festival. The festival was a part of the project “Creating Dialogue and Cooperation Schemes between Anjar & Kfar Zabad villages through shared environmental concerns” which was funded by OTI/USAID Lebanon. The project aimed to develop a collaboration scheme between two nearby conflicting villages (Anjar and Kfar Zabad) based on common environmental concerns where they share the wetland water resource. The activities of the project concentrated effectively on different leadership and conflict resolution workshops between Kfar Zabad SSG & Anjar environmental group, where the final activity of the project was organizing the festival as a sum up of a successful collaboration between the two groups. Through this festival, Hima Kfar Zabad SSG shared its knowledge and experience with Anjar environmental committee on issues related to tourist management, eco-tourism and event management.

c) Hima Qoleileh/Hima Mansouri

Qoleileh Marine Hima is a typically rich environment, where the great variety of inland forms encompasses a diverse habitat that includes agricultural lands, a sandy beach with few rocky areas combined with a plentiful supply of freshwater springs extending to around 4 km along the coastline. It is home to many important species, particularly sea birds and globally threatened sea turtles that require urgent conservation efforts. Therefore, Qoleileh Marine Hima is an important link between the local community of the village and their marine environment and has been preserved, ever since its establishment, as a proposed Key Biodiversity Area (KBA).

Qoleileh Marine Hima represents one of the most-used public beach areas in the southern area of Lebanon for recreational activities. The effort spent on empowering and supporting the livelihood of the local community of Qoleileh village encouraged a commitment to biodiversity conservation.

SPNL aims at protecting the site after cataloguing the major natural resources and assessing the course of change and management as well as the integration of the local community in such a long-term, dynamic and sustaining process.
It was thought that there are opportunities to provide assistance, which will be essential in lessening the after-effects of war, and to support local efforts to protect and expand investments in the village’s rich natural resources. Based on the SPNL efforts and meetings with the Qoleileh Municipal Council, Qoleileh coastal area was declared as a Marine Hima by municipal council decree.

The local community living around the marine Hima and constituting around 6,000 inhabitants depends largely on agriculture, fishing and public employment to make a living. Most of this community is educated, however their socio-economic status is middle class and below.

A strong and repetitive theme that emerged during the implementation of the project was that the community values the natural character and rugged beauty of their environment and village. In recent times, visitor traffic to and through the village has decreased, particularly after the war, and the local community expressed their desire to encourage growth and development of the project, which preserves the overall southern natural and physical resources and enhances it as a special place to live and visit. They expressed a wish to be proactive and have input to the future planning of their village, in order to capitalize on income generating opportunities in the Hima.

The effect of the July 2006 war of Israel on Lebanon was devastating on Qoleileh village. It led to atrocious and escalating death tolls, casualties and psychological trauma. At the environmental level, the war contributed to the demolition of around 3,500 houses. The infrastructure status of Qoleileh village presented by road, electricity, waste supply and wastewater networks, was destroyed. Furthermore, 15 fishermen lost their boats and equipment. This has exacerbated unemployment rates which added up to another prevalent tragedy in the village. The post-traumatic effects of the war were manifested in women and children facing psychological distress, as a result of the destruction of shelter and economic disintegration.

The onset of SPNL’s initiative to conserve Qoleileh Marine Hima was from the socio-economic point of view and to respond to the effect of the July 2006 war with its effect on people and nature. SPNL supported the local community through mobilizing a drinking water treatment plant for the village which helped in raising the interest and cooperation from the community towards SPNL’s efforts (the SPNL HOPE campaign in collaboration with BirdLife International and IUCN, which targeted local communities at Hima Kfar Zabad and Qoleileh Marine Hima).

The long-term project objective intends to conserve the southern beach of Lebanon and its maritime resources. It will specifically focus on the area extending from southern Tyre to Naqoura (a village located on the border with Israel), through involving fishermen and farmers in conserving these resources while complementarily empowering their economic status. Subsequently, this brings the ‘rights’ of the local community into the forefront of action, which represent the skills required to manage the natural resources within a sustainable framework.

SPNL took the initiative with municipalities, elected by the local community, and carried out open meetings with the local community. SPNL then consolidated a site support group (SSG) to support in the conservation of the site. The SSG is made up of three groups: the first of which is composed of 15 fishermen, the second of 9 women (housewives) and the third of 5 young scouts, who are tied by relationships of belief, interests and knowledge, all of which link their livelihoods to the conservation of the natural resources of their village. Each of these groups is composed of individuals that operate at the level of their group, and in coordination with individuals of other groups.
The intention behind the Hima is to allocate fishing rights with the purpose of re-establishing stability in the industry and realistically addressing the issue of job creation linked with environmental conservation. The loss of the fishermen’s equipment left them with limited choices, lacking the methods of legal fishing. Thus, this project presented a very real challenge to SPNL, trying to garner the support of an embattled community. An intensive process began in 2006 to facilitate the start of a project. Most importantly, the municipality and community of the village were united and committed themselves to SPNL and to the project. The rationale behind the project is two-fold, to eliminate illegal fishing methods and to create jobs, including in the fishing industry and as tour guides, which would generate livelihood incomes. The municipality and the community of Qoleileh village have indicated their satisfaction with the process followed by SPNL, agreeing that it is well-balanced and transparent. The provision of fishing equipment, coupled with economic empowerment and employment equity, were identified as key criteria for instigating the fishermen SSG to secure and promote the Hima.

SPNL employed the SSG members in the rehabilitation of a building left by the United Nation Forces when they were headquartered in the village, coming up with a storage area for the fishermen’s equipment and a visitor’s center. SPNL also focused on community empowerment at two different levels, capacity building and equipment provision with the purpose of realistically addressing the issue of job creation linked with environmental conservation. SPNL supplied the fishermen with two fishing boats equipped with 16 fishing nets, in addition to a set of necessary diving equipment. Further, SPNL organized several trainings to raise the capacity of the fishermen on seabird identification, using binoculars and the Arabic language version of the Field Guide to the Birds of the Middle East, in addition to a training course on traditional skin dive fishing using the diving equipment provided.

Knowing that the post-traumatic effects of the war were manifested in women as well, SPNL organized a capacity building workshop on hosting and food-making skills for women of Qoleileh village in order to provide rural women with a viable source of income that would enhance their quality of life and make them active members in their communities through practicing modern and simple production techniques for producing high quality, natural local foods. Initiatives as such were identified as key criteria for instigating the local community of Qoleileh village to secure the Hima and promote sustainable practices in favor of its natural resources.

Conservation efforts have multiple benefits that encompass the following:

- Increased awareness and sense of responsibility for the protection of natural resources
- Synergized efforts for nature conservation
- Enhanced solidarity of the local community
- Reactivation and expansion of job opportunities
- Boosting the economic capital

Maritime resources form the cornerstones of spirituality, culture and law for the local community. Since resources are scarce, land rights should be enforced in order to preserve the exclusive right of the local community. The land rights constitute the basis for the economic livelihood of the community, as they state the principle of rights of access without degrading the environment.

The management of the Hima is based on an agreement between SPNL and the municipality for the conservation and sustainable use of natural resources. On site, fishermen monitor birds, clean the shore, practice legal fishing and monitor the activities of the visitors. Women play an important role in helping the fishermen reduce the pressure created by human activities on the site, especially in their efforts to monitor the site and through awareness campaigns on-site and in the village. SSG members have initiated rotations at the site and thus report threats and observations to SPNL and the municipality, through the elected coordinator of the group, who is the direct contact between the SSG on one side, and SPNL and the municipality on the other. It is important to note here that communication is through phone calls, field visits and meetings. Internet communication is limited due to financial constraints, and electricity cuts.

This project was exciting all along because it was supported by the enthusiastic cooperation of the Qoleileh Municipality as well as community groups, who demonstrated unanimous attitudes by coming together in an effort to improve their current situation with a look to the future at how best to manage the Marine Hima.

SPNL has also succeeded in including the Mansouri beach, which is both beautiful and rich in biodiversity, within the hima. The municipality of Mansouri expressed its desire to adopt the Hima approach in Mansouri village, ultimately expanding the project and giving the importance of marine environments and resources wider recognition. This supports local efforts to expand investments in Mansouri’s naturally rich resources and helps link its community to a range of empowering opportunities. Based on the above, Mansouri coast was also declared as a Hima, with the aim of achieving socio-economic stability and conserving the environment at the same time.

d) Hima Upper Akkar/Hermel

The Akkar Hermel region is considered one of the most special regions (not only in Lebanon, but in the Middle East). It is characterized by high biodiversity value (variety of trees: Cedars, juniper, turkey oak, pine, fir,...) and a large variety of wild plants in addition to its importance as a bottleneck for soaring bird migration. It is characterized by a locally diverse climate, hydrology, soil and vegetation. It is important to note that forests cover 21% of the Akkar Hermel region area which is much higher than the national average forest cover in Lebanon which is just 13%.

Akkar Hermel region ranks among the poorest regions of Lebanon and is the most deprived according to the UNDP report “Poverty, Growth and Income distribution in Lebanon” published in 2008. It has a high migration rate. Hermel region is characterized by a clan structure with the Shiiitat sect while the Akkar region’s population is mixed, consisting primarily of Sunni Muslims with a minority of Alawites and Christians.
Local economic activities lack diversification with predominant concentration on the agriculture sector (20.39%) according to the UNDP study. The high level of poverty compels the local community to find other sources of income such as charcoal production contributing to deforestation, thus producing negative impacts on natural resources.

The July 2006 war and the Nahr al-Bared war aggravated the situation in the Akkar Hermel region, resulting in huge economic losses due to cutting of roads, increase of fuel cost, difficulty to access market etc. The agriculture and fishing sectors were especially affected. Unfortunately, Akkar Hermel region had little benefit from the post-war recovery programs.

The main cause of the conflict between the Al-Jaafar family/tribe, Qobayyat municipality, the NGO “Council for Environment and Heritage – Qobayyat”, and the Ministry of Environment was due to the declaration of “Karm Chbat” area as a Nature Reserve by the Ministry of Environment without consulting the local community and land owners (Jaafar family). This led to a chaotic situation as people responded to this lack of consultation (including forest fires, logging of trees, quarrying, intense grazing, and uncontrolled construction).

SPNL contacted both communities and acted as the mediator in order to resolve this deeply rooted conflict. Successfully, both communities realized the importance of the site and its linkage to their culture, heritage, and quality of livelihood. Therefore both agreed to work together with SPNL towards the conservation of the region, and sustainable use of natural resources, establishment of Himas, and initiation of ecotourism and rural development projects; thus supporting the local community and improving the status of their livelihood in parallel with conservation and sustainable use of natural resources.

To confirm the positive initiatives and set the cooperation between SPNL and the local community within a legal framework, a cooperation agreement was drafted highlighting the main aims for the cooperation (mainly conservation of the region, promotion of environmentally friendly practices, and upgrading the livelihood status of the community).

Both conflicting parties (namely: Al-Jaafar family and Qobayyat municipality and NGO) have declared their interest to collaborate with SPNL and IUCN. This positive declaration confirmed the vision and need for empowering the local community in order to be capable to participate in the management and decision making process for their region.
Initially, two activities were planned, namely: a training workshop on participatory approaches, and exchange visits to Hima sites. The interest of the local community members and the variety in the level of attendance in Upper Akkar necessitated a change in approach from a training workshop on participatory approaches to a consultation meeting involving a variety of stakeholders from the local community. The participatory meeting organized by SPNL in collaboration with members from the IUCN ROWA office had important results, namely:

- Identification of the social map where participants agreed on the geographical boundaries for the area that it is crucial to start working on.
- Identification of the problem tree for the selected area (actually divided into two trees: an environmental problem tree and institutional problem tree), where they highlighted the main problems that the area suffers from.
- Identification of main stakeholders and analysis of their role according to the perspective of the local community (affecting the resource or affected by the interventions done).
- Identification of opportunities for the area where they highlighted the main priorities as:
  - The first priority was: Establish a center for ecotourism and agriculture.
  - The second priority was: Implement pools for water harvesting from rain and snow in the upper mountains of Akkar in order to provide water sources to mitigate forest fires.
- Suggestion to establish a steering committee that ensures the representation of all involved municipalities.

It is important to note here that Mr. Yaseen Hamad Jaaafar - head of the Al-Jaafar family - offered the use of a building he owns as a center for awareness, ecotourism and rural development for the whole region.

It is important to note here that SPNL work on the Upper Akkar/Hermel is still recent, initiated officially in mid-2009. In addition to the meetings, exchange visits and consultations, SPNL adopted stakeholder analysis tools in order to learn about the community, plan its future activities and select the SSG members.

5. Overview of Hima SSGs

a) Characteristics of SSG/ profile of members

SPNL has established SSGs in 3 different key biodiversity areas, and has recently embarked on a fourth. Each SSG varies in the process adopted for the selection of its members, in the characteristics of the members, interest and skills, age group and gender distribution.

In Hima Ebel es-Saqi, the process was objective and highly strict based on pre-set criteria, with questionnaire and interviews. The SSG had mixed gender and members had a university education. Unfortunately, the economic situation and political affiliation has led to internal conflicts and affected the motivation of their members.

As for Hima Kfar Zabad/Hima Anjar, the SSG members in each were selected by the mayor of the village representing the major families in the villages. In Kfar Zabad, they are young university students who are interested to conserve their wetlands and raise the profile of their village especially as an IBA and an ecotourism destination. The main problem here was in their age as they are not settled and members are lost along with job opportunities outside the village.
In Qoleileh marine Hima, these groups were mostly fishermen and women, and the objectives were not strictly conservation. They were mostly related to improving their economic practices and income, but resulted in enhanced conservation.

Upper Akkar/Hermel Hima is still recent and the SSG is not established yet. It is important to note here the development in the participatory approaches used by SPNL in dealing with the local communities - SPNL has recently adopted stakeholder analysis tools in assessing and analyzing the stakeholders and their effect on the site.

b) Volunteering

The concept of volunteering in our region is still mostly linked to humanitarian causes (health, children, the elderly) while its linkage to conservation is still embryonic and basic in nature. This is entailing more effort from the BirdLife Partner in order to show the link between conservation and people’s quality of life, thereby motivating people’s participation.

c) Motivation and sustainability

Motivation of SSG members varied from one site to another based on the hidden reason for their participation. An objective comparison between SSGs would help in clarifying this issue.

The interest of SSG members in Ebel es-Saqi was linked to the opportunity of job creation through a new project in their village that has suffered from occupation for a long period. This, in addition to political affiliations and conflicts for power in the village, have affected the work of the SSG and its sustainability.

In Hima Kfar Zabad/Hima Anjar, the main reason for people’s participation was to raise the value of their village and upgrade its status. These reasons supported their cooperation and enthusiasm towards conservation and promoting ecotourism, but the main problem was losing them for job and livelihood opportunities. Currently, SPNL is promoting the involvement of older age groups as a mitigation measure for this problem.

In the case of Qoleileh marine Hima, the entrance of SPNL to the village community was through socio-economic support that was much needed. This approach proved to be successful in raising people’s interest to participate in the SSG as they learned to value the site with its linkage to their livelihood and quality of life.

d) Lessons Learned and Recommendations

General
- The most important issue is for the BirdLife Partner to avoid building expectations that cannot be fulfilled. As an example, local communities prefer not to engage in tourism, but would rather work directly for the site’s conservation values rather than be disappointed due to the volatility of tourism as a result of political instability in the region.
- Typically, and due to historic and cultural development in the region, natural areas and human presence are intertwined. Hence the need to engage with people whenever conservation action is to be undertaken.
- IBAs are mostly located in rural and remote areas, where the population is suffering from lack of jobs, migration and impoverishment of the natural resources. In order to attain their conservation
objectives, the BirdLife Partner needs to combine technical nature conservation skills with poverty reduction, job creation and educational actions.

- The definition of SSG was discussed and dissected not only by SPNL but also by those considered as part of SSGs. The terms volunteers and local were contested, with some arguing that national / international individuals were entitled to create or be part of SSGs since IBAs are often of global importance.
- SSG members are well aware of the importance of the sites at both national and international levels. They are also well aware of the financial resources and international exposure obtained by the BirdLife national Partner because of the work undertaken at these sites. Therefore the need for transparency in communicating activities related to the sites is a must to maintain a relationship of trust with the local communities and SSGs.
- Empowerment of the local communities through training, exposure in the media, and active participation are seen as essential to maintain momentum in case there is no funding to support site action.

The overall conclusions and lessons learned have been grouped into four categories: Enhancing Conservation, Institutional Arrangements, Benefits of Conservation, and Changing Behaviors.

**Enhancing Conservation**
Given that the main objective of BirdLife Partners is to conserve birds and biodiversity, some key factors of success have been identified:

1. The most successful interventions have been those where site action came in after national surveys were finalized and priority sites identified. This allows for interventions to be focused and backed by clear identification of threats and issues to be addressed.
2. If working on a given site, it is crucial to undertake census and surveys and to collect data and information in a scientific manner. Often these surveys are demanding in terms of time and financial resources, but they provide key monitoring indicators for the impact of activities.
3. The scientific data plays a major role for supporting and advocating the suggestions for a given site. Whenever SPNL came in with a role of guidance and technical assistance without imposing their views, these were thoroughly accepted by the local authorities.
4. In the long run, training local stakeholders on technical issues such as bird monitoring and giving them the responsibility to do so, is one of the most effective ways of ensuring local ownership and acceptance of conservation action.

**Institutional Arrangements**
From the experience, it came out clearly that the SSG approach has a number of benefits in the long run, especially in terms of reducing the load on SPNL to monitor and manage IBAs as their numbers expand, and on increasing the ownership of conservation action at the local level by delegating these responsibilities. Should the SSG approach expand and become more formalized, there are a number of issues that need to be addressed, that are detailed below:

1. Given the linkage of SSGs to IBAs and the responsibility incumbent on the BirdLife national partner to designate and conserve these areas, there is a clear necessity for the BirdLife Partner to monitor and contribute to management decisions in such a way as to ensure that they do not negatively impact the criteria based on which IBAs were designated.
2. The relation of the SSG with SPNL varies from one site to another (formal like an SPNL chapter, or just a group of volunteers working on common goals for the Hima). In all cases, the relation with SPNL is governed within an agreement between SPNL, the municipality and the SSG clarifying the role and responsibility of each party.
3. The main role of the BirdLife partners with respect to the SSG is seen as providers of technical support, whenever needed, as national advocates for IBAs and SSGs, as well as providers of up-to-date information on conservation issues. In addition, wherever tourism-related activities are developed, the BirdLife partner can play a key role in promoting sites.

4. BirdLife partners usually have access to national and international arenas to which SSGs may not have access; thus, the BirdLife partner can play a major role in promoting the actions and achievements of the SSGs.

5. At any given site, there might be different interest groups with whom the BirdLife partner may have to engage with. There is a need to maintain a certain level of flexibility to allow for this multi-stakeholder approach.

6. Finally, whenever the BirdLife partner has been clear about their own capacity and that of the SSG, the initiatives have proven to be more successful than others. It is therefore important to avoid building expectations and to deliver as promised; otherwise the relationships of trust might be disrupted.

Benefits of Conservation

One of the major issues is the matter of financial benefits and costs of conservation action. It appears that in most cases there is at least a component of job creation and income generating activities. In addition, whenever engaging in site-based activities, SPNL incur additional financial running costs, in terms of transportation, employment, communications etc.

Below are some key lessons learned from the experiences:

1. Given the sensitive political situation in the area, and given the current mindsets in the region that are not in favor of eco-tourism at this stage, it is important not to promote tourism as an entry-point for conservation. Local stakeholders appear to be more sensitive to the natural values of “their” sites and consider tourism as an added value but not an end by itself. It might be important to link awareness and nature tourism targeting school communities as the main target for visitors and income turnover for the sustainability of site management.

2. In cases where the BirdLife partner has undertaken income-generating activities, these activities should be well planned with prior feasibility studies and business plans in order to ensure their success.

3. Splitting the benefits in case of income-generating activities is essential for both proponents. On the one hand, the BirdLife partner needs sustainable sources of income to maintain their operations and services provided to IBAs and SSGs. On the other hand, SSGs often perceive the BirdLife partner as reaping the benefits. Clarity and transparency are two key features that go hand in hand with successful long-term partnerships.

4. In cases where poverty alleviation activities are projected, it is important for the BirdLife partner to either hire the right people with the right skills or to undertake partnerships with specialized development organizations. It is important to remember that the objective and expertise of the BirdLife partner is nature conservation and not social/development work.

5. Though the SSG approach is foreseen to reduce the load on BL partners in terms of technical staff for the direct implementation of site-based action, the increase in number of sites and their SSGs should be accompanied by the recruitment of specialized staff within the BirdLife partner to ensure smooth follow-up, liaison and communication with SSGs.
Changing Behavior

Most initiatives at IBAs aim at changing the attitude and behavior of local stakeholders whose activities negatively impact these sites. In order to succeed in this endeavor, the BirdLife partner should adopt a behavior that builds strong relationships of trust:

1. Ensure that the local stakeholders really participate in the decision-making process rather than consulting them with a ready-made plan or project.
2. Most IBAs are located in rural areas where communities are usually conservative and resistant to change. In order for the BirdLife partner to be fully accepted, transparency is a key factor of success. Though it may take time to explain and to discuss with the local communities, strong linkages through careful communication have proven to be the major ingredient for long-lasting relations.
3. Each site is particular not only in terms of its natural characteristics but in terms of its cultural and political characteristics as well as the social set-up. Each site should be treated differently and given enough time. By understanding existing social struggles, structures and constituencies, this allows for better maneuvering and planning of activities to achieve successful conservation action.
4. The presence on the ground and accessibility of the senior management of the organizations as well as the technical staff are also essential in making local people feel they are valued and important.

6. Networking between Hima SSGs

SPNL is taking the responsibility of managing the IBAs/Hima sites through its very limited resources linked to project based funding. In contrast, the Ministry of Environment has an established department with the authority to manage the country’s nature reserves through the appointed GAC and with allocated annual budget.

a) Current Status

SPNL manages the Hima sites through appointing a Hima site manager from the SPNL management team who is responsible for the vision of Hima management, planning, implementation and monitoring in collaboration with the municipality and local SSGs formalized through a Memorandum of Understanding.

Hima SSGs are still individual entities related to each site and no official network has been established yet. On the other hand, several activities of collaboration have been organized such as:

- Exchange visits, meetings and experiences between the different sites which have proved crucial in initiating interest from local communities and onset of new Himas.
- Common projects and collaborative efforts between SSGs in neighboring Himas have been experienced where conflict resolution was based on conservation of environmental commons (e.g. case of Kfar Zabad/Aanjar and Upper Akkar/Hermel).

b) Future Vision

Given the outcomes of the above experience in the different Himas, and the financial burden on SPNL, it has been suggested to complement the SSGs by a national group that could be called “Friends of IBAs”. This could be another means to embrace those interested people at a national level to engage and support site conservation.

SPNL has re-adapted its strategy from projects to programmes as a result of the experiences acquired from the Hima revival. Recently, SPNL is revising its strategy in managing the IBA/Hima sites which
entails a change in the organisation of the SPNL management team and their TOR. Thus, the new
strategy proposes the establishment of 3 main departments as follows:
1- Science and Monitoring Department
2- Conservation Department
3- Awareness and Education Department
Where each department will be led by an SPNL officer who would be coordinating the needed work on a
national basis.

This new strategy would necessitate the empowerment of local groups and the delegation of new roles
to the SSGs, initiating a “local site manager”, and with a clear collaboration and monitoring role for the municpality and SPNL. Thus, the SSGs role would be empowered in terms of:
• Monitoring and information
• Influencing policy and decision making
• Early warning of threats
• Education, awareness and community outreach
• Financing and sustainability
Which would feed to the SPNL departments of science, conservation and awareness.

Thus, SPNL’s vision for the near future is to initiate a network for the IBA SSGs that in addition to their
above role would be more institutionalized to provide a larger membership and constituency for SPNL,
and to play an effective role in conservation advocacy on a national basis.

Further current discussion is related to the definition of SSGs, especially their basis on being local and volunteer-based. It appears that staff of nature reserves (where identified as IBAs) can play a key role in advancing the understanding, local support and conservation of an IBA. Restricting the definition to volunteers rules out key people. Furthermore, people that were not from the local community itself expressed great interest in some sites and clearly articulated their desire to be part of an SSG. Broadening the definition would allow it to encompass both of these stakeholders. An example could be: “A group of people actively engaged in the conservation of an IBA”.

The new strategy for SPNL management and engagement with local communities, would necessitate the upgrade of skills for SPNL employees in social intervention techniquest such as participatory rural appraisals, appreciative inquiry approaches, stakeholder analysis tools as well as facilitation skills, collaborative management, conflict resolution and consensus building.

A further note is the need for larger national projects that comprise the involvement of different sites with extended durations of projects involving community development/coodination because more time is needed for planning, full understanding of the social context and participatory decision-making.

7. Memorandum of Understanding with Private Sector for Ecotourism development, marketing and promotion in Himas

In order to raise awareness about the value of the IBA sites and to bring income to local communities, SPNL has developed a partnership with a private eco-tour operator “Lebanese Adventure”. They have supported SPNL in providing a vision for ecotourism activities at specific sites and provided training to SSGs on guiding skills, nature tourism and marketing for specific IBAs. They are supporting the
promotion of Bed and Breakfast initiated with local communities, that is attracting eco-tourism to the Hima/IBAs and providing income and job creation to members of the local communities.

Based on the success of such initiatives, the private sector, investors and local NGOs are already investing in eco-lodges bordering IBAs and Himas.

Networking of IBAs and SSGs could be complemented and supported by broadening this partnership and the development of a common marketing plan for the IBA sites on a national basis.

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