**Annual Review 2019**

**SPNI’s Vision:**

SPNI’s vision is for Israel’s unique landscape, natural resources, and environment to be preserved in harmony with the country’s developmental and settlement needs, and for Israeli society to understand the importance of Israel’s natural resources, and to respect, preserve, and enjoy them as part of nurturing social resilience and quality of life.

SPNI’s aims:

* To protect the environment, the values of nature, the landscapes, and the historic and cultural resources of the Israeli people and of humanity in general.
* To educate the public in environmental awareness and knowledge of the land, to cultivate an affinity for the landscape and the environment, and to strengthen links between the wider public and Israel’s fauna and flora, wildlife, diverse landscapes, and historic remains and settlements.
* To work with government authorities to increase their awareness of environmental issues and encourage them to promote legislation to protect the environment, balanced eco-friendly planning, and sustainable development.
* To engender awareness of nature and environmental conservation, to conduct activities that shape the attitudes of decision-makers and the general public towards nature and environmental issues, and to increase their commitment to preserving nature and the environment.
* To maintain conceptual and organizational autonomy so that SPNI can work independently to advance the aims set out in these regulations.

**How we work:**

The Society for the Protection of Nature in Israel (SPNI) was founded by nature lovers and “enthusiasts” who opposed the draining of the Hula Valley in 1953, and who foresaw the implications of that scheme for the unique natural environment of northern Israel.

While the draining of the Hula Valley had unfortunate consequences, including damage to the environment and the extinction of unique species, the struggle to prevent it gave rise to the birth of SPNI, an independent, public nonprofit—the oldest and largest environmental organization in Israel and one of the oldest such organizations in the world.

In 2018, SPNI celebrated its 65th anniversary. Since our founding all those years ago, we have worked to protect and preserve our country’s nature, its environment, and its unique landscapes; conducted educational activities and field trips; and built a strong community that considers itself a part of nature and is committed to protecting the environment and the natural world.

Our vision is to preserve Israel’s nature and environment by creating a direct connection between people and nature.

As part of our daily work, we:

* Strive to preserve open spaces and biodiversity.
* Encourage hiking in nature, and domestic and foreign tourism, out of a belief that direct encounters with nature lead to stronger connections with the natural world, the environment, and environmental activism.
* Are active among decisionmakers in the Knesset and in government, aiming to increase their awareness of environmental issues and encourage them to advance environmentally-friendly legislation and planning to ensure quality of life and environmental protection.
* Represent environmental organizations in Israel in regional and national planning agencies.
* Develop and promote collaborations between environmental organizations and other groups.
* Maintain organizational, professional, and ideological autonomy, so that we can advance our goals freely and independently.

We work with the public throughout Israel, in large cities and smaller settlements, across diverse social and cultural sectors. Our power lies in the support we get from you: the friends of SPNI, our followers on social networks and newsletter subscribers; those who support our work through donations, and by signing petitions and filing objections; those who join us in protests; our activists and volunteers; our field trip participants; the thousands of people who take part in our environmental educational programs; and the incredible young people who are part of our hiking clubs.

**Protecting Israel’s rivers**

**2019 ended with a big win for the Kishon river. After a long public battle, the plan to establish the Kishon Park in Haifa Bay has finally been approved.**

The Kishon river is one of the longest and most important rivers in Israel. The outstanding natural wealth of the Kishon basin and mouth, where the river meets the sea, are unique in Israel and are a source of local identity and pride. The Kishon river also has tremendous importance for conservation: its broad riverbeds and the river views of the “Lagoon” area and the “Appendix” are part of its ancient route and are the last remnants of a unique landscape comprised of shallow lagoons that intermittently flood with marine tides. It is also one of the last fast-disappearing coastal salt flats in Israel.

The Kishon river has suffered from serious pollution (its tributaries, the Saadia and the Gadara, remain polluted). The Israeli government, through the Ministry of Environmental Protection, the Kishon Drainage Authority, and the Kishon River Authority, have invested and continue to invest large sums of money, totaling hundreds of millions of NIS, to restore the river and to remove and treat contaminated sludge from its riverbed. However, plans to create a park were opposed by the Israel Port Authority (IPA), which wanted to earmark part of the area for containers arriving from the Haifa Port. After a protracted public battle, the IPA’s request was rejected, and in September 2019, the plans for the park were granted validation—the final stage in their approval.

SPNI now calls on the Haifa Municipality and the Israeli government to invest the resources required so that the public can benefit from the park’s establishment, the Kishon river’s ecosystems can be restored, and contamination of its tributaries can be prevented.

For a long time, Israel has suffered from severe water shortages. However, in recent years, Israel has desalinated large quantities of seawater, and, thanks to this, has been able to avert the water crisis. The desalination of seawater provides a window of opportunity for us to halt the trend of destruction of Israel’s rivers.

Around a year ago, the Israeli government approved a plan to restore the natural flow of seven rivers in the north of the country, at a cost of over 80 million NIS. This followed our long-standing work with decisionmakers, which included laying out an achievable vision for restoring rivers. Our vision includes the following principles: sustainable management of natural water resources, releasing and restoring springs, establishing criteria for groundwater extraction, adopting an eco-hydrological approach, and changing the management structure responsible for managing rivers.

In the past year, as a result of the Knesset’s dissolution and the resulting political turmoil, there has been a delay in implementing the plan. We continue to lobby the government to implement its June 2018 decision (which has already been budgeted at 80 million NIS) to restore water to eight coastal rivers.

Educating the Next Generation of “River Guardians”

For a number of years now, SPNI has worked with the Ministry of Environmental Protection and the Drainage Authorities to develop and run the “River Guardians” educational program. Under the program, dozens of student groups are undertaking projects involving various rivers and streams across Israel. The program helps communities develop a connection to their local rivers, the local natural resources, and their environmental heritage. The program promotes environmental responsibility in a variety of ways, including through a river rehabilitation project.

Communities Advocating for Rivers

We support local residents and activists taking public action to rehabilitate and improve rivers and other bodies of water. Our work in this area includes an ongoing project to rehabilitate the Taninim river, led by a group of local activists and supported through extensive educational activities at SPNI’s Hof HaCarmel field school.

We are particularly proud of our work this past year in Golden Park in Kiryat Shmona. There, students from Kiryat Shmona’s Rambam School undertook field activities as part of an integrated sustainability education program run by the Ministries of Education and Environmental Protection, and led by staff from our Eastern Galilee Field Studies Center. The students learned about the amazing river that runs through their “backyard,” took part in research projects, and even carried out some impressive clean-up work. Their activities attracted the attention of the local community, and we partnered with the Kiryat Shmona Local Council and the Ministry of Environmental Protection to organize a large public event celebrating their work.

In the upcoming year, we plan to increase our efforts:

* To raise public awareness about the importance of rehabilitating Israel’s springs and rivers on a national and a local level;
* To obtain consent for the eco-hydrological management of river basins;
* To transform Israel’s Drainage Authorities into River Basin Authorities;
* To implement an effective treatment system for cross-border river pollution, which begins in Judea and Samaria and pollutes local and coastal rivers as well as mountain and coastal aquifers;
* To restore the Ministry of Environmental Protection’s role as a leader in river rehabilitation, under the Rivers Law;
* To empower Israel’s Drainage Authorities to be major players, while strengthening the environmental aspects of their work, under the Drainage Law;
* To continue our work with communities to rehabilitate rivers and streams.

**Education and Hiking**

**Over 65 years ago, our deep love for nature inspired us to establish SPNI. Every day since, we have shared the magic of nature with thousands of children, families, and adults on Israel’s hiking trails. We believe that real environmental change can only take place when people feel a deep sense of connection with and responsibility towards nature. Nature does not belong to anybody—each and every one of us is a part of nature. Our modern lives, so disconnected from nature, make the natural world seem distant and foreign. We believe that by fostering a deeper knowledge of nature, we can help our society become more connected to Israel’s unique landscapes and better equipped to protect its wildlife.**

We have organized hikes throughout Israel for many years. During this time, we have learned, experimented, grown, improved, and helped develop Israel’s network of hiking trails.Educational hiking is a rapidly-evolving field; we invest heavily in developing our content and training methods, and we provide continuing education programs for our guides. SPNI has been at the forefront of Israel’s hiking world for many years and remains a leader in this field.

The Jerusalem Educational Hiking Conference

This year, we aimed to improve the guidance provided on annual school trips to a “five-units of study” level of difficulty, under the auspices of the Ministry of Education. We kicked off the new year with Israel’s first ever educational hiking conference, in collaboration with Beit Berl Academic College, the Israel Nature and Parks Authority, and the Ministry of Education’s “Field-Nation-Society” department. Over 400 delegates from across Israel attended the conference, conducting detailed discussions about the future of educational hiking. During the conference, we launched SPNI’s Educational Hiking Prize.

The conference was the first step in our plans to engagement decisionmakers in a process to change the state of annual school trips. Our goal is to ensure that future generations of Israeli children experience a safe, content-rich, meaningful hike on Israel’s nature trails as an integral part of their studies.

Annual school trips are an integral part of the Israeli school experience in certain grades. With the right leadership by nature guides and an experience that truly engages students, we believe that the annual trip can be a life-changing experience and not simply a social event.

Educational Journeys

More and more elementary schools are partnering with us to change the way annual school trips are perceived. Together with our sister organization, Megalim Eretz (“Discover the Land”), we guide hundreds of thousands of students and teachers on educational journeys that turn the annual school trip into a valuable and meaningful experience.

These journeys promote educational values and stimulate awareness, knowledge, and activism on behalf of nature, society, and Israel. The journeys are the starting point for an ongoing process that nurtures vital educational values in Israeli schoolchildren.

Our educational journeys have the power to reach all of Israel’s diverse social groups and populations. This year, we organized the journeys as part of our work to advance Israel’s youth. For many of the young people on the program, the journey was the first time that they had been close to nature; it was their first opportunity to experience an extended trip away from home, to have an encounter outside of their usual social group, and to enjoy new landscapes, ideas, and discussions.

Annual School Trips

This year, more elementary schools than ever before have chosen to organize their annual school trip through SPNI and Megalim Eretz. We have adapted our annual school trip curricula to comply with the Ministry of Education’s core programs. We specialize in creating an optimal experience for students, where they are treated as equal partners rather than as a passive audience listening to the nature guides. The guides themselves make use of cutting-edge teaching tools to develop a personal connection with students and teachers, and to encourage them to engage with the information they are given. As an environmental organization, our focus is on protecting nature and the environment in Israel. We believe that when students have a positive, meaningful personal experience on their annual school trip, it can inspire them to become good citizens and environmental activists.

Field Schools

In the early 1960s, we had a dream: to establish a “field school,” a center for learning, exploring nature, and teaching.

In 1963, we opened the Ein Gedi field school, the first of its kind in Israel. Today, SPNI runs twelve field schools across Israel, from Kibbutz Dan in the north to Eilat in the south.

Our field schools are located in diverse areas with unique ecosystems. Our guides, young and old, have deep connections with these local areas and their wildlife, using their knowledge, skills, and passion to lead hikers on local trails and natural attractions. Nine of our field schools also offer overnight accommodation; in 2019, these field schools hosted 250,000 visitors, including schoolchildren, summer camps, tourists, organized groups, and families who chose to spend their vacation as close as possible to nature and to take advantage of our guides’ extensive knowledge.

Environmental Education: “Children Leading Change”

We believe that real environmental change and activism can only occur through ongoing learning that inspires a sense of wonder and love for nature. We run our environmental education programs in a large number of schools and kindergartens across Israel and through them, we seek to inspire children to develop a sense of affinity and belonging to their local environment. We work with local communities to help foster engagement, commitment, and responsibility, and to empower young people to contribute and take positive action for the environment. Our “Children Leading Change” program helps shape the next generation of Israelis and given them the tools to identify problems, work together to resolve them, and inspire other activists.

In 2019, approximately 35,000 children from a diverse range of backgrounds and urban neighborhoods took part in our ecological education activities, where they learned about biodiversity, urban wildlife, and sustainability. The children “adopted” nature sites, went on hikes, and set up temporary biodiversity spaces. We run the Children Leading Change program in formal and informal education frameworks in large cities, SPNI communities, and towns in Israel’s periphery.

This year, we enjoyed successful collaborations with local authorities, the Ministry of Environmental Protection, the Ministry of Education, and school educational teams.

For more details, click here.

This year, the outdoor and urban woodland activities we conducted in Herzliya preschools were nominated for the Ministry of Education’s Prize for Unique Contributions to Education.

This is a new and particularly successful continuing education course for preschool teachers on how to engage children in outdoor spaces and urban woodlands. The activities we teach are designed to inspire preschool children towards sustainable living and participating in urban nature activities that foster knowledge, skills, and values. They in turn connect and share these benefits with their local community.

Each week during the school year, the children go outside to explore and learn about the environment in a natural setting near their preschool. The children’s outdoor learning and experiences are then directly linked with studies in the classroom, giving teachers an opportunity to promote sustainable life choices.

To help strengthen local community ties and encourage other preschools to visit outdoor spaces, the teachers also get involved in various initiatives, leading sustainability projects such as adopting local woodlands, planting bulbs and local wildflowers, and introducing a set of reusable dishes and cutlery that can be loaned out to families for events in order to reduce the use of disposable items.

Training Our Guides

For decades, we have trained nature guides to lead educational hikes, promote the proper use of natural resources and land, and deepen their knowledge and love of Israel’s natural landscapes. We consider our guides to be crucial in our educational work with children, youth, and adults. In 2019, we established a rich training program for hundreds of hike leaders, tour guides, and environmental educators. Our courses, continuing education programs, and workshops are based on SPNI’s decades of knowledge and field experience. They are not only popular among our own guides but also among independent guides and those from other environmental and hiking organizations, including the Israel Nature and Parks Authority and Lotem.

Guides who undertake professional training through our courses and continuing education programs obtain a high level of knowledge and professional tools that last them a lifetime, enriching their academic studies, training, further education, and professional work.

Assimilating and Engraining Environmental Values

SPNI has an implementation team whose role is to lead teaching programs in preschools and schools across all sectors of Israeli society. They provide school staff with tools to drive personal and educational change, and to embed sustainability within their lifestyles, teaching methods, and educational practices. Our implementation work combines institutional training and personal guidance to transfer knowledge, tools, and applied experience obtained in our training courses into teaching that promotes sustainability as a lifestyle. The concept of implementation views localism as a diverse, experiential, and valuable learning space. It highlights local issues and the fact that there are various levels of “place,” as well as offering opportunities to effect change. Our implementation team undergoes annual training that addresses global and Israeli sustainability issues, nature conservation issues, and tools for guidance and activism.

Teacher Training

The goal of environmental education in general, and of our Sustainability Education Program in particular, is to raise awareness among teachers and students about the ecological crisis, its causes and possible solutions, and to promote behavioral change and sustainable choices in schools, homes, and communities. Our courses provide up to 60 hours of instruction and are geared toward teachers specializing in Land of Israel studies, sustainability, and environmental conservation. This year, we ran 15 courses in the north, south and center of Israel.

“Tav Teken” Tour Guide Courses

SPNI’s Arabic-language community offers five “Tav Teken” tour guide courses that provide professional knowledge for educators and tour guides as well as skills for continued independent study. The courses also offer tools on navigation, outdoor leadership, and managing tour groups.

Bioresearch

We are meeting a growing number of elementary school students who are keen to expand their knowledge of nature and biology. These students visit our field schools on science trips, where the research they conduct with us is often the highlight of their school studies. Run by naturalists and subject experts, our science trips emphasize individual research and learning within a scientific environment that supports nature. The students get to experience a “lab outside the lab” and many tell us that the science trip was the highlight of their studies.

Holidays and Summer Camp

During the summer and other school vacations, we run day programs for younger children, and sleep-away camps for older ones. Every year, our field schools open their doors to thousands of children and youth who want to have a unique experience, to learn and have fun, and to connect with nature. In these programs, children learn about nature and the outdoors, explore the environment, and make new friends. The programs are run by our professional guides, and many children choose to come back to us year after year. This year, our summer schools and camps hosted tens of thousands of children and young people.

Eretz Ahuvati (“My Beloved Country”)—Hiking Trips for Adults

Hiking with SPNI is a life-long pursuit. As part of our Eretz Ahuvati program, we run high-quality tour programs for adults, led by our finest guides. This year, approximately 42,000 people participated in the Eretz Ahuvati program.

For information and to sign up for the Eretz Ahuvati program, click here.

Green Tours

We also offer a range of high-quality leisure trips. Every weekend, our guides accompany hundreds of Israelis on nature tours.

This year, we were delighted to meet the growing number of companies and organizations who joined us for team-building experiences and activities on Israel’s trails. On these trips, employees enjoy quality time together and experience a connection with nature both as individuals and as a team. More and more companies are choosing to join us for these activities while helping us protect nature in Israel.

Next year, we will continue to inspire people to love Israel and protect its nature and environment through our tours. Please continue to join us on our trips and programs—and don’t forget to tell your friends and family, too!

For “Green,” our guide to Israel’s nature, click here.

The Israeli-Arab Community and SPNI

Our work with the Israeli-Arab community began around 30 years ago, and targets all Arabic speakers in Israel.

We work with schools, kindergartens, local authorities, youth groups, and various communities within the adult population, to help the Israeli-Arab community connect with nature as well as their community’s human heritage both locally and across Israel. We also teach communities about the importance of protecting nature and open spaces.

We believe in creating partnerships with local education authorities and communities to develop continuing education programs that promote quality of life, the environment, and society both today and for generations to come. We aim to cultivate young Israeli-Arab community leaders, who understand the importance of protecting nature, the environment, and society. We promote sustainability and help people within the Israeli-Arab community live sustainable lives.

Our Work with the Israeli-Arab Community

Community Group Hiking

We currently run eight community hiking groups, each with 40 adult hikers and ramblers. The monthly hikes are tailored to each group and led by experienced SPNI guides who have in-depth knowledge about the natural sites they visit and the flora and fauna, geography, and history of the places they visit.

Environmental Education

SPNI’s Children Leading Change environmental education program operates in about 800 elementary school classrooms throughout Israel, teaching children about sustainability and the importance of protecting nature and the environment. The children learn about their local environment and habitats, and are inspired to effect change and promote social and environmental values within their communities.

Hiking Groups

For over 30 years, SPNI’s hiking groups have been learning and teaching others about Israel through hiking, orienteering, and sleeping in the great outdoors. Our hiking groups foster responsibility, independence, environmental leadership, the ability to cope with adversity, knowledge of the land, and a love of hiking. The young people who take part in our hiking groups across Israel learn important field skills, including navigation and how to use natural resources. SPNI currently runs around 80 courses for seventh-grade students.

Community Events

In 2019, we organized Urban Nature Week events in four Israeli-Arab towns—Beit Jann, Yanuh-Jat, Bir al-Maksur, and Jisr az-Zarqa. The events took place on the weekend and attracted hundreds of people who visited our information booths and enjoyed experiential training. Visitors learned about the rich biological diversity that exists in our cities, and about the dangers looming over some of Israel’s nature sites.

The Rivers Event: This year, we held our very first Rivers Event within the Israeli-Arab community, on the Tsipori river. The aims of the event were to make a national call on the government to take responsibility for protecting and rehabilitating rivers and to encourage local collaboration with Drainage Authorities to establish a group of river allies. Hundreds of people of all ages attended the event, and we plan to hold similar events each year in a number of Arab-Israeli towns.

Educational Journeys

This year, some 1,630 ninth grade students from 13 Israeli-Arab towns took part in educational journeys designed to inspire them with ideas about nature conservation, as part of their Leadership and Citizenship Education courses. Lasting several days, the journeys have a strong social and environmental focus and aim to strengthen the children’s sense of belonging and pride in Israel. The journeys are unique in that they are an ongoing process, and not just a one-off experience or encounter. They focus on conversation, discussion, and empowering students and teachers to actively participate and experience a meaningful journey.

Educational Hiking

In 2019, we organized approximately 600 days of nature trips within the Israeli-Arab community, as part of a service provided to schools. The students were accompanied by our professional guides on various trails, where they enjoyed experiential learning and learning through exploration.

Religion, Identity, and Environment Tours

This program for Druze students began two years ago. Its goal is to raise awareness of nature, Druze identity, and the Druze religion. The program consists of school trips for ninth through eleventh grade students from 16 Druze villages, including tours of sites that have significance in the Druze religion. The eleventh-grade students listen to a lecture at Jethro’s Tomb, while the ninth-grade students enjoy guided tours on age-appropriate topics and workshops about Druze identity at the Jethro’s Tomb. The guided tours are conducted by professional guides and Druze religious leaders who have undergone training in leading workshops and lecturing on these subjects. Around 3,000 students take part in the program each year.

Equal Environment

Our “Equal Environment” initiative operates in three towns in the north of Israel—Rameh, Deir al-Asad, and Kafr Kanna—and consists of a community training program to deepen public knowledge on various environmental topics, in particular the issue of waste. The initiative appeals to a number of target communities including women, religious leaders, businesspeople, young people, schools, teachers, and community workers. The program provides participants with key knowledge and tools via tours, environmental activism workshops, experiences, and wildlife surveys. At the end of the training program, participants create their own independent environmental projects.

Social Engagement Classes

Our social engagement classes target young people who have a strong affinity for nature and a strong desire to contribute to the community. Comprising a variety of youth and social activities, the classes address environmental, social, and cultural issues, and develop personal and collective responsibility, commitment to the environment, and love for Israel. The classes are held every week and include a diverse range of topics and activities including leadership, village tours, field cooking, hikes, cleanups, and work on various projects. In 2019, we ran eight youth classes in different villages, collaborating with local high schools.

River Guardians

SPNI’s River Guardians project is a joint venture with the Kinneret Drainage Authority, the Western Galilee Drainage Authority, and the Ministry of Environmental Protection. The project is run in four schools in Ein al-Asad, Maghar, and Acre. Fourth- and fifth-grade students adopt a local river, and learn about the water crisis, nature’s right to water, and water habitats, while also discovering more about “their” river and conducting activities like cleanups, raising public awareness, and trail marking.

**Protecting the Marine Environment**

**“The Blue Half,” SPNI’s marine environment initiative, incorporates a number of different projects to promote the protection of Israel’s maritime territory—which covers the same area as its land territory (that’s why we call it the “Blue Half”)!**

**The initiative includes conducting workshops for planning officials and policymakers, lobbying, public advocacy, legal action, and field activities through the Sea Watch app.**

**We invite you to dive into the Blue Half here.**

Protecting Marine Nature

In 2019, we made significant progress in protecting the Mediterranean Sea via marine nature reserves. In September 2019, Finance Minister Moshe Kahlon signed a declaration to establish the Rosh Hanikra Achziv Marine Nature Reserve. Around 100,000 dunams in size, the reserve extends from the Israel-Lebanon border in the north to the southern border of the Achziv national park, and another 15 km westwards from the eastern shore. The purpose of the marine nature reserve is to protect local fauna and flora and also Achziv Canyon, a unique underwater rift incorporating a rare combination of diverse morphological structures and a wide range of aquatic habitats.

SPNI played a significant role in the fight to obtain approval for the reserve, through objections hearings in the Local Committee. We were also instrumental in the fight to ban fishing in the reserve, where we fought against a petition filed by a group of fishermen who had requested to fish in the reserve. The court ultimately rejected the petition.

In September 2019, the Haifa District Committee gave the green light on plans for a marine nature reserve in Rosh HaCarmel, during an appeal and objections process in which SPNI countered fisheries’ arguments and emphasized the importance of maintaining the area as a nature reserve free of fishing. The marine reserve plan covers an area of around 50,000 dunams in Rosh HaCarmel, which is the underwater extension of the Mount Carmel cape that juts into the sea to the west of Haifa. We invite you to join Dror Keren on a dive into the blue at HaCarmel. Plans to establish the Avteach Marine Nature Reserve alongside the Nitzanim Sands Nature Reserve are also being advanced.

The Israel Planning Administration (IPA) has accepted a proposal drafted by SPNI and the University of Haifa regarding Israel’s exclusive economic zone in its marine spaces. In late December, the IPA recommended that the first deep-sea marine nature reserve be given the go-ahead in the area known as the Palmachim Disturbance, which is home to deep sea corals and unique methane springs. Since the legal infrastructure in the exclusive economic zone is not yet in place, SPNI will now take various steps to advance plans for the deep-sea nature reserve.

The Mediterranean Sea Policy Document

In December, the Committee for the Protection of the Coastal Environment adopted a policy document for the Mediterranean Sea area, which SPNI was heavily involved in drafting. The Committee determined that 8.6% of sovereign waters would be fishing-free nature reserves, and that additional areas would be entitled to a lesser degree of protection. We lobbied to increase the level of protection granted to marine areas, so that up to 20% would be designated as marine nature reserves where fishing and other harmful activities would not be permitted.

The Committee for the Protection of the Coastal Environment also determined that the committee responsible for maritime planning would be part of a balanced and controlled planning mechanism rather than an overriding committee, as was decided in the IPA’s original proposal. In this case, too, we were heavily involved in pushing forward a balanced plan for Israeli sovereign waters, and we also represented environmental organizations and the public before planning and management officials.

The Exclusive Economic Zone: The Maritime and Gas Drilling Law

The Ministry of Energy recently granted a natural gas exploration permit within “Block D,” which lies in a zone that includes the Palmachim Disturbance, an ecologically sensitive area with deep-sea corals and methane springs that is also a breeding ground for bluefin tuna.

We are working with the Ministry of Energy to ensure that this ecologically sensitive area will remain outside of the drilling and exploration zone, and that seismic surveys, which can potentially damage sensitive marine life, will not be permitted.

The proposed wording of the Bill relating to Maritime Areas and Gas Drilling, which regulates state laws in the Mediterranean Sea Exclusive Economic Zone, in particular those concerning oil and gas exploration and production, does not confer appropriate status on the Ministry of Environmental Protection. Instead, the Bill leaves the entire decision-making process solely in the hands of the Ministry of Energy, which has an overt interest in development. This is a dangerous and unbalanced situation.

The Mediterranean Sea is the most important source of drinking water for the Israeli public, as well as being a source of food (fish) and of oxygen production, which mitigates climate change. Moreover, the Mediterranean is also home to dolphins, sea turtles, rare tuna, and hundreds of other species.

Unfortunately, accidents and disasters during gas and oil drilling are not remote possibilities but definite occurrences—indeed they are already happening.

A largescale disaster occurred in 2010 in the United States, in the Gulf of Mexico. Small spillages and accidents happen all the time in the Mediterranean—we simply do not hear about them because no one is monitoring them.

It is the duty of the Minister of Environmental Protection to monitor environmental planning and implementation processes, and to represent both the public and nature against the narrow interests of energy companies. The Bill relating to Maritime Areas is currently on hold because of Israel’s current political situation; as soon as the Knesset Committees resume their work, we will resume our call for the Economics Committee to amend the Bill relating to Maritime Areas as follows:

1. The establishment of a Strategic Planning Committee (a Maritime Areas Planning Committee for the Exclusive Economic Zone) attended by a representative from the environmental organizations, to maintain a balance between development and conservation in decision-making while maintaining public transparency.
2. An effective separation between the licensing process for oil and gas drilling facilities, which shall be carried out by the Ministry of Energy, and environmental control, which shall be carried out by the Ministry of Environmental Protection. The Ministry of Environmental Protection shall enjoy equal rights and independent status in decisions regarding the approval of energy exploration and drilling in the Exclusive Economic Zone with the right to a veto in cases where there is severe environmental risk.
3. Compliance with transparency and permission for public opposition during drilling approval processes.
4. A definition of marine nature reserves shall be included in the Bill relating to Maritime Areas in order to protect natural areas that require strict conservation.

Fishing Reforms

In January 2017, comprehensive fishing reforms entered into force in Israel. For the first three years, some of the new regulations were implemented in a more lenient form, to give fisheries time to adjust. In January 2020, the reforms will enter into force in full. Below are the main achievements of the reforms, the impact of which has already been felt during the past three years:

Ending Destructive Fishing Practices

The reforms have put a stop to trawl fishing in certain sensitive areas comprising a third of the Israeli Mediterranean, with the help of a fund of approximately 20 million NIS provided by the Ministry of Finance, the Ministry of Environmental Protection, and the Israeli Nature and Parks Authority. Monies from this fund have been used to compensate trawl fisheries from the north of Israel (the Kishon river) and will enable the closure of the northern third of the Israeli Mediterranean Sea to trawl fishing, and also prevent trawling in shallow waters and rocky areas across Israel.

As part of our efforts to complete fishing reforms and promote marine nature reserves, we have published a detailed review of the environmental and economic damage caused by fishing. To read the review, click here.

Recently, following the adoption by the Committee for the Protection of the Marine Environment of the Maritime Areas Plan—and also thanks to our work—a decision was taken to completely stop trawl fishing in Israel.

In the coming years, we will continue to push for this decision to be implemented until all trawl fishing has ended and this devasting fishing method has been banned in Israel.

Preventing Scuba Spearfishing

Scuba spearfishing during the breeding and gathering seasons has been completely stopped, except for shore fishing, and a daily quota for sport fishermen has been established.

The minimum length allowed for dusky grouper (*Epinephelus marginatus*) fishing has been increased.

Protecting Endangered Species

In December 2019, the Minister of Environmental Protection, Zeev Elkin, signed an addendum to the protected species list, which had not been updated for a decade. The list includes hundreds of plants and animals, and species of freshwater fish have now been included for the first time. The newly added species are not being actively fished and are not under any immediate threat. However, two species that are being actively fished—the dusky grouper and the bluefin tuna—have not been included on the protected species list.

Around a year ago, Minister Elkin agreed to include the dusky grouper and the bluefin tuna on the list of endangered fish, but as a result of pressure from fisheries, in the end he decided not to add them to the list of species that are protected from fishing.

As far as we are concerned, this is not the end of the matter, and we will continue to do all we can to protect the dusky grouper and bluefin tuna through the law.

Monitoring and Responding to Maritime Hazards—Together

This year, Sea Watch--our real-time Mediterranean Sea hazards reporting app--was joined by a new app, which reports on hazards in the Red Sea.

Please download the app here and join our Sea Guardians community!

About a week after the launch of the Red Sea app, we discovered that a hazard had been removed from the waters to the north of the Eilat-Ashkelon Pipeline docking station. A member of the public who was diving in the area had come across a large pane of glass that had apparently been deliberately knocked out by some people who had climbed onto the docking station. The pane had fallen into the sea and was lying on a bed of young, soft corals. A hazard report was sent directly to the Israel Nature and Parks Authority, and Parks Authority inspector Omri Omesi was able to remove the pane from the water the very next day.

Since the launch of the app, the Israel Nature and Parks Authority has removed around 15 ghost nets from the Red Sea, thanks to reports from members of the public via the app.

Upgrading Enforcement: In mid-2018, responsibility for fisheries enforcement was transferred to the Israel Nature and Parks Authority, with four dedicated marine teams. This move will ensure proper enforcement of the regulations that were agreed by the Knesset. The authority to prosecute will remain with the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development. To date, there have been hundreds (!) of enforcements, hundreds of case files opened, and hundreds of fines imposed for illegal fishing.

As part of the collaboration between Sea Watch and the Israel Nature and Parks Authority’s maritime department, tens of enforcement cases have been successfully filed against illegal fishing, as a result of reports made by members of the public via the app.

The app works in partnership with Mediterranean Sea enforcement agencies. The reports, including full details of each incident, are transferred directly to fisheries enforcement personnel via SMS and email.

The Rosh HaCarmel Sea Community

Over the last two years, SPNI and the Israel Nature and Parks Authority have teamed up with sea conservationists and friends of the ocean in Haifa to establish a local sea community, a group of civilians who aim to raise public awareness of marine conservation and transform Shikmona into a thriving marine nature reserve. Over 100 activists have joined the community, most of them from Haifa and the surrounding area. The community is headquartered in SPNI’s Haifa community center and is part of the Mediterranean People coalition.

Members of the community took part in a fascinating training program run by leading Israeli marine conservationists and scientists. They learned about marine ecology, archaeology, fisheries enforcement, marine waste, marine reserves, and citizen science. They also enjoyed tours of the nature reserve and a visit to the sea turtle center.

To date, the Sea Community has been involved in a number of nature conservation activities, including taking protected sea daffodils from an area of roadworks on Hubert Humphrey Street and replanting them in the National Park; working with the Israel Oceanological and Limnological Research institute to monitor algae on the rocky beach in the nature reserve; and promoting advocacy and educational activities.

We believe that the best way to protect marine nature is by establishing, enforcing, and managing marine nature reserves. Currently, only the Rosh HaNikra marine nature reserve is effectively protected. We will continue to push for large marine reserves that will help us to protect entire ecosystems and large marine fauna with wide-ranging habitats.

Protecting Israel’s Beaches

This year’s biggest beach protection win was the decision by the Regional Committee for Planning and Construction for the Northern District to completely abolish plans to build a holiday resort on Betzet beach. We teamed up with local residents and other environmental organizations in the fight to stop this destructive plan, a bitter struggle that began at the start of the 1980s and that has raged on for almost three decades.

Betzet’s sandy beach is the only breeding ground for severely endangered brown and green sea turtles. In recent decades, we have made considerable efforts to protect their beach breeding grounds. An island of open space, Betzet beach is of great ecological importance because it has been kept free of development—and that is how it must stay. The development of an urban hotel complex on this beach would devastate local wildlife and the natural landscape and would also infringe the rights of tens of thousands of people—local residents and all Israelis--to an open, natural, universally-accessible beach. Israel’s beaches have shrunk to such an extent that they are now a rare commodity. They must remain open to the public and be kept as free as possible from development.

Help Us Protect Israel’s Beaches!

We are thrilled to meet you in the field, and to help you learn more about Israel’s unique beach habitats. This year, our Shekamim field school held a number of important nature conservation events to raise public awareness. Around 5,000 people (!) took part in the traditional sands march in the Holot Nitsanim reserve, where they learned about this important sand dune habitat and why we need to protect it. We held a large event to protect the Yavneh sand dunes, and another at the Nes Tziona Nature Reserve to protect its unique kurkar (eolianite) and flora.

The Hadera SPNI community held an event at the Hadera River Park to protect the sea and raise public awareness about the sharks living in the Hadera River estuary. The members of the public who attended the event visited our information booths where they learned about various issues, including the damage caused by disposable plastics. The event also featured a livestream video, filmed from a hovercraft, of schools of sharks swimming in the nearby sea.

Some 400 students from Zichron Ya’akov joined in a cleanup day at Ma’ayan Tzvi beach, where they got involved with experiments and learned how plastic pollutes our seas and wildlife.

**The major beach protection challenge that we currently face is how to prevent the IPA from moving forward with its scheme to build six new marinas. The IPA’s national master plan for these marinas threatens to completely destroy public beaches in Nahariya, Haifa, Hadera, Netanya, Tel Aviv, and Bat Yam. In a small and overcrowded country like Israel, it is vital that our public beaches—which are already limited--are not destroyed or closed to build new marinas. Please watch this excellent short video, where Tali Kedmi, our public activities coordinator, explains why the marinas scheme is so dangerous and unnecessary—click here for the video.**

**Marking Israel’s Trails**

The Israel Trail Committee and SPNI work tirelessly to mark hiking trails that are safe and exciting while also sensitive to the environment.

Israel boasts around 10,000 km of marked trails, including the Israel National Trail, which at 1,000 km is the longest trail in the country. Traversing the whole length of Israel, the Israel National Trail is a spectacular and secure marked trail that hikers can enjoy all year round, without accidentally crossing into military firing zones or into areas that require a security escort.

We are sure that, like us, you love hiking in Israel. After all, Israel is an amazing country for hiking. Its unique location as the bridge between two continents means we can enjoy the best of both worlds without having to travel very far. In just a short journey, we can be in the very heart of the desert, relax in the lush, green landscapes of the Carmel region, listen to the trickling of the River Jordan’s sources, touch the fresh snow on Mount Hermon, or take a refreshing dip in the Red Sea. There’s no question that Israel is a stunning country, and that its nature and open spaces have the power to move even the most indifferent among us. What is just as amazing is that hiking in nature is so easy and accessible here in Israel--that’s thanks to those good old trail markers that seem to have been around forever, with their familiar three painted stripes, two in white and one colored, that help us find our way and that children love to search for as they walk along the trails.

Many of us go hiking, some of us frequently, on our country’s trails. We keep to the marked trails, follow the colored trail marks, and check the route descriptions or a map to see which color trail mark we need to follow whenever the trail forks. The marked trails point us in the right direction and keep us safe. If you hike with children, you will definitely have joined in the game of trying to be the first to spot the next trail mark (although sometimes the winner is disputed…).

This year, we continued to update and improve our trails and trail maps. We even added another section to the Israel National Trail in the Judean Desert, which includes the Dead Sea and Masada.

Get to know our new trail maps: the Carmel, the Southern Coastal Plain, the Negev Craters, Central Negev, Central Arava and the Eastern Negev, and the Ramon Crater.

Do you know who is responsible for marking our amazing trails? Here’s a little bit of history for you:

Israel’s first hiking trail was marked in 1947, in the Judean Desert. In the early 1960s, the Israel Trail Committee was established alongside SPNI. The symbol that the Committee chose for marking hiking trails in Israel was a rectangle made up of three parallel stripes. Since then, Committee staff have been responsible for marking and maintaining the trails that appear on 20 trail maps, and for publishing updated information like changes in terrain and new trails. Established by SPNI, the Trail-Marking Committee is a public committee that includes representatives from various bodies. Its purpose is to plan, create, and mark thousands of kilometers of hiking trails across Israel. The Committee also invests considerable amounts of money in maintaining, marking, and repairing our tens of thousands of kilometers of marked trails and paths.

Until 2000, all Israel’s trails were marked by volunteers. Since then, our trail marking team has professionalized, and we ask staff to commit to the job for at least a year. Our trail markers have to be sociable, friendly people who love hiking, are not afraid of hard physical labor, and who don’t shy away from responsibility. While the job may sound pretty simple, it is actually not at all easy, and requires a great deal of personal responsibility. Our trail marking teams are dispatched on week-long marking missions in the field and have to remain together on the trails from Sunday through Thursday, without a break. As you can imagine, they don’t get to go home very often! They also need very high levels of concentration so they can mark the best and safest paths, while being mindful of the route and nature conservation. They also have to make sure that the trail marks are the correct distance apart, to create a clear sequence that hikers can follow.

Every single trail in Israel—and there are tens of thousands of kilometers of them—are re-marked every three to four years. We take extra care to check the safety of existing routes and to carry out repairs and update routes wherever needed. As well as this, of course, we also mark new trails, and recently we have focused on long trails and cycle paths.

The Israel National Trail

The Israel National Trail is undoubtedly the jewel in the crown of all our marked trails. Stretching from Kibbutz Dan in the far north to Eilat at Israel’s southernmost tip, the Israel National Trail traverses a plethora of diverse landscapes, sites holy to several major religions, and Jewish, Muslim, Christian, and Druze settlements. The Israel National Trail serves as the main artery that connects into a single network the thousands of kilometers of marked trails that branch off of it, while ensuring that the unique nature and character of each trail is preserved.

The Israel National Trail logo and name are registered trademarks of SPNI.

The Israel National Trail starts out at Beit Ussishkin in Kibbutz Dan and finishes at SPNI’s Eilat Field School. Crossing mountains, forests, cities, villages, settlements, rivers, and springs, and passing roads, nature reserves, archaeological sites, and unique natural phenomena, the Israel National Trail is a spectacular and fascinating encounter with Israel that embodies Israeli values of nature, landscape, heritage, tradition, religion, and multiculturalism. To walk its length is to experience a cross-section of Israeli society: schoolchildren, youth movement members, soldiers, tourists, families, and all kinds of people who love Israel and nature. The trail is marked with three stripes in white, blue, and orange.

In 2015, to celebrate the Israel National Trail’s 20th anniversary and a decade of Google’s presence in Israel, the two organizations teamed up to document the trail on camera and share the images on Google Maps. The Israel National Trail is the longest trail that has ever been photographed in this way, and our joint venture with Google was the first time in the world that a hiking trail stretching the length of a whole country has been captured on film. The trail experience is available in Google Street View to for all to see, from anywhere in the world.

The Israel National Trail has also become a focal point for typical Israeli hospitality. One initiative that has already become an institution is the Trail Angels. Ordinary people who live and volunteer along the Trail, the Trail Angels help out with rescue efforts, place water along difficult parts of the trail, welcome weary hikers with a cup of coffee, help them move kit, or even offer them a warm bed and a shower, or a patch of lawn where they can pitch a tent.

In 2020, we will celebrate the Israel National Trail’s 25th Anniversary. In the quarter of a century since it began, the Trail has become part of Israeli culture, and every year more and more Israelis join the community of Israel National Trail “alumni” and enthusiasts.

Please take a look at this excellent item by the Israel Public Broadcasting Corporation about marking the new section of the Israel National Trail in the Judean Desert, which stars our very own trail marking team—click here to watch.

**Protecting Urban Nature**

**We work in partnership with you to protect and cultivate urban nature and urban nature sites. We promote balanced urban planning that incorporates data from our urban nature surveys, to ensure that city planners take local nature into account.**

To date, around 50 towns and local councils have conducted urban nature surveys, and data from some of these have been incorporated into municipal master plans and schemes. This year, for the first time, we conducted urban nature surveys in Arab communities in Judea and Samaria. Some municipalities--including in Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, and Kfar Saba--have compiled urban nature municipal policy documents. In 2019, the Jerusalem Municipality approved a master plan—the first of its kind in Israel—for creating urban nature sites in the city.

This year, we celebrated a decade of urban nature surveys, and are delighted to see that they are gaining momentum across Israel. There is a growing group of officials in national and local government offices who are now involved in work around urban nature, and we are working with these partners to compile a national urban nature database and employ urban ecologists.

This year, we also marked the 25th anniversary of the opening of the Nili and David Jerusalem Bird Observatory—Israel’s very first urban nature site. Located in the National Quarter (Kiryat HaLe’om) in Jerusalem, the Observatory has welcomed a great many visitors since it first opened its doors a quarter of a century ago.

Whenever we talk about urban nature, we often hear skeptical responses from people who question whether there really is any nature--animals, plants, birds—in our cities. However, nature lovers who live in Israel’s cities are well aware of the richness of urban nature, and this is why we are doing everything we can to ensure that all Israel’s urban residents can get to know the amazing wildlife on their doorsteps.

Click here to view all our urban nature surveys on a single map.

Unveiling the Results of Our Many Urban Nature Surveys, From the North to The South

This year, we held a series of public events to unveil the results of our urban nature surveys. Organized in partnership with local authorities, these events aimed to show the public the exciting wealth of nature that exists right in the heart of Israel’s towns and cities, and to emphasize the importance of protecting it. We also held a series of meetings for local authority employees in several major cities, including in Jerusalem, Netanya, Herzliya, and Kfar Saba, to help them learn more about urban nature.

**Monitoring and Protecting Urban Nature—Together with You**

In recent years, we have provided online urban nature reporting forms and asked the public to join our civilian science initiatives, including via our smartphone app. Citizen science is a partnership between ordinary citizens and scientists.

At SPNI, we consider ourselves a bridge between the public and scientists on issues concerning nature conservation, biodiversity, and open spaces. We encourage Israel’s nature lovers to get involved in citizen science—by reporting injured animals, helping to promote wildlife crossings, monitoring butterflies, counting birds to enable us to track population changes, reporting on bird sightings, and mapping conservation-sensitive areas.

Many of our monitoring activities occur in urban areas. We conduct extensive civilian science monitoring work in six major cities--Haifa, Hadera, Tel Aviv, Modiin, Jerusalem, and Beersheba. Through these activities, which are organized through our urban communities, we come into contact with a large number of Israeli nature lovers who are deeply committed to protecting the environment. We run training courses for groups of activists involved in vital monitoring work, who have a deep knowledge of the urban nature on their doorsteps. The data these activists collect help us work in a more focused way to protect urban nature.

We invite you to go out and experience urban nature, and report to us through our app.

Are you aware of the wildlife living in your town? Have you come across any interesting birds? Colorful butterflies? Turtles? Hedgehogs? Lizards? Or any other interesting creatures or natural phenomena? You can help us! Send us reports on animals, plants, and archaeological remains, or about biohazards like building debris and sewage that could harm wildlife in the city. We will incorporate your reports into our nature surveys, which are then sent on to local authorities and help planning officials protect urban nature for the benefit of local people.

Together with the Israel Lepidopterists’ Society, which runs the Israel Butterfly Monitoring Scheme, we have set up groups of activists in Hadera and Modiin to monitor butterflies. After undergoing training, volunteers from these groups go out each week to monitor butterflies along a set route. The data they collect provide scientists with a continuously updated picture of local butterfly populations.

In Haifa, there is a great deal of interest in understanding more about the salamanders living in the city’s wadis. To help us improve our understanding of the salamander population, we created and launched a salamander reporting form. A group of nature enthusiasts has teamed up with SPNI’s Haifa community and the HaLev HaYarok environmental organization to carry out surveys of the salamanders in the wadis on rainy evenings. The volunteers have recorded tens of salamanders—a far larger population than we thought—living in the wadis. For more details or to submit a report, click here.

SPNI’s Haifa community has launched a new project to monitor the city’s wild boar population. For more details, or to make a report, click here.

Following Up on the Urban Nature Survey

Public interest in urban nature is on the rise, and we are also delighted to see that local municipalities are incorporating the data accumulated in our urban nature surveys into planning. A wonderful example of this is the process that is taking place in Pardes Hanna-Karkur, which is a great model for how data collected through our urban nature surveys can be utilized by the public in various ways. Here, our Hof HaCarmel Field School and the Local Council of Pardes Hanna-Karkur are driving a process to incorporate urban nature survey data into the integration, conservation, and management of natural infrastructure in the urban environment. By combining our efforts in this way, we all reap the benefits. We believe that the best way to conserve the environment for the benefit of all is for local communities to work together to protect local nature.

Urban Nature Week

In March 2019, at the height of Israel’s flower and rainy seasons, we joined 20,000 Israelis to celebrate Urban Nature Week—something that has already become an annual tradition. Over the course of the week, thousands of people took part in over 50 events at urban and nature sites across Israel. There was something for everyone: small group tours for families, young people, nocturnal wildlife enthusiasts, bird and butterfly enthusiasts, tree lovers, and anyone who wanted learn about the colorful sea of flowers blooming all around them; lectures, photography exhibitions, and discussions; a documentary film about nature and the city; and held activities to explore the rich wildlife in our public gardens. Urban Nature Week also included activities organized by groups of activists and SPNI’s urban communities.

Together with you, the Israeli public, we celebrated the nature that is thriving in our towns and cities, and learned how to protect this amazing natural world right outside our homes.

Gazelle Valley Park Wins the Nechama Rivlin Prize for Sustainability

As part of the 4th Israeli Climate Conference, President Reuven Rivlin awarded the first Nechama Rivlin Prize for Sustainability to four remarkable projects and campaigns, among them SPNI’s Gazelle Valley Park (Emek Hazvaim), the largest urban nature park in Israel and home to around 50 gazelles.

SPNI manages Gazelle Valley Park on behalf of the Jerusalem Municipality.

Gazelle Valley Park is a spectacular area of nature at the very heart of the city. Today, it is very difficult to imagine Jerusalem without Gazelle Valley Park, but until very recently, this was really the case. The area has been under threat from developers on several occasions. The Gazelle Valley Action Committee, which SPNI founded alongside local activists and other environmental organizations, firmly opposed the destruction of this important area of nature, and in 2015, the Park--a unique, new model for managing a natural ecosystem within a city—was opened to the public. We are delighted at this success, and we would like to thank the Prize Committee for choosing us, as well as our wonderful colleagues who work tirelessly every day to maintain this magical urban nature park.

Currently, we are planning to open another urban nature park in Jerusalem—the Nahal Zimri Park—where we will put into practice the important principles that already underpin our management of Deer Valley Park.

**We will continue to conduct urban nature surveys and to push for their data to be incorporated into city planning. We will also continue to promote the physical and statutory protection of urban nature sites, and the establishment of communal urban nature parks, their professional management, and their upkeep by strong, active communities.**

**Protecting Open Spaces and Local Nature**

**The Prevention of Environmental Hazards Law—A Massive Win!**

The Prevention of Environmental Hazards Bill—which we initiated after the 2017 ecological disaster in which the Ashalim stream’s waterbed was contaminated by an acid leak—has been signed into law. Endorsed by 33 Members of Knesset and passed without any opposition, the bill proposed that harm caused to protected environmental assets, as well to protected areas, be defined as “environmental damage.” The new law will permit civil suits to be filed against any person or entity who causes damage to natural habitats or to fauna or flora that constitute public property. The law also empowers courts hearing these claims to order respondents to pay additional fines for any environmental damage they are found to be responsible for causing in cases where the court determines that this damage can no longer be remedied.

**Don’t Build A Hotel in The Sasgon Valley!**

For SPNI, the Israel Union for Environmental Defense, and residents of Hevel Eilot, 2019 began with a huge win in their battle to halt the development of a hotel complex that would have resulted in irreparable damage to the Timna Valley. Over the years, tens of thousands of Israelis from all over the country joined our campaign to save Israel’s Sasgon Valley. This campaign has been a resounding success, ending with a win-win solution for both sides. The developers will get their wish to build a hotel in Timna Park (the southern lobby option), and the Sasgon Valley will remain pristine and unspoiled.

**The Netiv Ha’asara Dunes Coastal Forest Park**

As 2019 came to a close, the Objections Subcommittee published a decision in response to our opposition to plans by the Jewish National Fund and the Ministry of Agriculture to develop Netiv Ha’asara. In a dramatic precedent, the Subcommittee ruled that, of the 6,700 dunams proposed for development in the plans, a total of 5,500 dunams would be earmarked for a nature reserve.

**Open Spaces Strategic Plan**

This year, we continued to push forward with our Open Spaces Strategic Plan, the main focus of which is to protect Israel’s wildlife corridors at a national level.

In addition, we are pleased to be able to report the success of several local schemes to protect wildlife corridors from needless development and construction. In each of these cases, we worked hard to find solutions that met local development needs without harming nature. As a result, plans to expand the Elad settlement eastwards, which would have damaged a national wildlife corridor, have been halted. We succeeded in protecting the wildlife corridor between the Avihayil National Park and the beach in the Committee for Planning and Building Preferred Residential Areas (CPRA)’s Havatzelet HaSharon plan. Meanwhile, the Modiin city master plan, which was filed a few months ago, no longer includes plans to expand the city into the southern hills. While this is itself a very significant achievement for nature conservation, we will continue to push for Modiin’s southern hills to be declared a nature reserve.

We will continue to lead the public battle against the “Wine Park” tourism project, as well as the fight to save the wildlife corridor at Givat HaTzvaim near Zichron Yaakov, a magical and rich area of nature that is now facing a real threat of destruction.

**Opposing the Expansion of the CPRA**

In recent years, SPNI’s Planning Guardians coalition has focused on opposing the Committee for Planning and Building Preferred Residential Areas (CPRA), which pushes forward hastily-planned, massive development programs across Israel that adversely impact hundreds of thousands of Israeli citizens, who simply do not have the tools or knowledge to oppose them.

The transfer of the Israeli Planning Administration from the Ministry of the Interior to the Ministry of Finance has meant that there is no single body to represent the interests of the public in planning processes. To fill this vacuum, we established the Planning Guardians, a coalition of civil society groups and professional housing and environmental planning organizations. Its aim is to foster an independent and professional planning system that gives a voice to civil society.

To read our CPRA Monitoring Report published in March 2019, click here.

**Reality is Not Perfect: The Wildlife Corridors Report**

This year, we published a report examining threats to Israel’s wildlife corridors. The report shows that without proper management, Israel’s wildlife corridors are losing their ability to fulfill their ecological role. The report sets out the importance of developing a policy-level mechanism for managing the corridors, to ensure their continued functioning. For this to happen, the wildlife corridors and their management must be defined in law, and a body must be established to manage and maintain them to ensure proper supervision and enforcement. The report was launched at an impressive ceremony, with A.B. Yehoshua as the guest of honor, which took place during a conference at the Jerusalem Nature Museum, organized in partnership with the Israel Society of Ecology and Environmental Sciences.

Click here for the full report.

**TevaBIZ—Business Protecting Nature**

The TevaBIZ project is led by SPNI in partnership with several leading Israeli agricultural companies, the Ministry of Environmental Protection, and the Israel Nature and Parks Authority. It provides businesses with project management tools, a GRI reporting protocol for biodiversity, and support for organizational processes that help integrate procedures, guidelines, and organizational cultures to safeguard biodiversity.

Through the project, we are collaborating with major companies in Israel’s infrastructure, agriculture, and quarrying sectors. We are trialing the integration of ecologists into major project planning and implementation decision-making processes, and implementing advanced protocols to minimize ecological risks from invasive species, light pollution, and direct harm to fauna and flora. We also provide ecological management procedures for the specific geographic areas in which the companies operate.

In addition, we are mapping how businesses influence biodiversity. We provide companies with a functional toolkit to enhance their positive impacts on biodiversity, and to help them integrate environmental guidelines into their organizational culture and internal management systems.

The project helps Israeli companies to improve risk management around business activities that might damage biodiversity, and to create new market opportunities while improving compliance with regulations. If companies fail to adopt a systemic approach to protecting biodiversity, they will lose public approval--as a result, their ability to operate in Israel and globally will be affected.

As part of our collaboration with the Ministry of Environmental Protection and the Israel Nature and Parks Authority, we have recently completed five projects with Mekorot (the National Water Company of Israel), Netivei Israel (Israel’s National Roads Infrastructure Company), the Milopri Agricultural Cooperative Society, Timna Valley Park, and the Israel Electric Corporation. The projects centered on reducing light pollution, preventing birds from colliding with power lines, encouraging agricultural work that supports biodiversity, and implementing an ecological management plan for the Timna Valley Park tourist attraction. We presented the results of these projects at the 2019 “Nature and Business” conference.

New Projects: The Eilat Sewage Treatment Plant, The Israel Cotton Board Ltd, Barkan Winery and The Golan Economic Company

*The Eilat Sewage Treatment Plant* –the plant incorporates a reservoir that serves as the most important humid habitat in the area. The reservoir is home to a diverse population of bird species, including endangered species like the ferruginous duck, Bonelli’s eagle, the lanner falcon, and Lichtenstein’s sandgrouse. The site also serves as a stop-over for birds migrating north during the spring, who arrive exhausted after crossing the Sahara Desert. We will create a management plan for the plant to help it protect and improve biodiversity by improving its natural infrastructure, addressing environmental hazards, and creating an infrastructure to enable it to integrate its own needs with those of the public, visitors, the environment, and the bird population.

*The Israel Cotton Board Ltd*—each season, some 44-110 square kilometers of land in various parts of Israel are used for cotton cultivation, which has a dramatic impact on biodiversity. Our project will focus on developing agricultural management practices that support biodiversity in cotton-growing areas. These practices include protecting natural vegetation, restoring endangered species, and improving wildlife connectivity to help reptile species move between areas of land that have been separated by cotton fields. Finding ways to integrate these management practices into the cotton-growing process will enable cotton farmers to find a balance between protecting Israel’s environment and growing essential agricultural produce.

*Barkan Winery*—Barkan is Israel’s largest winery. It manages vineyards in diverse habitats, some of which are adjacent to, or overlap with, wildlife corridors. Our project will focus on developing agricultural management practices to improve wildlife connectivity for large mammal species, including the Palestine mountain gazelle. We will also develop practices to protect natural vegetation and restore endangered or native species to the vineyard areas.

*The Golan Economic Company*—the open spaces in the Golan Heights are a significant natural asset that must be protected. Over the next few years, Golan communities are expected to expand, as the development of tourism in the region provides housing and employment for a growing local population. This project will develop a set of guidelines to reduce the marginal effects on biodiversity arising from the development of settlements and tourism in the Golan. The guidelines will address invasive species, light and noise pollution, and organic waste. Implementation of the guidelines will enable the continued development of the Golan, while minimizing negative impacts on the local environment.

Our work on invasive species in quarries, which we began with Hanson Israel, has not only produced results in Israel (where addressing this issue is a requirement for obtaining a business license from the Ministry of Environmental Protection), but also in Europe. Several years ago, the codex was translated into English and now this issue is also being addressed in quarries across Europe. Click here to read the full document.

**Completed Projects**

Recently, we completed five projects through the TevaBiz initiative that encourage the conservation of biodiversity to be enshrined in the core activities of private and government companies, including Netivei Israel, Mekorot, the Israel Electricity Company, the Milopri Agricultural Cooperative Society, and Timna Valley Park.

*Netivei Israel:* As part of a comprehensive process, Netivei Israel undertook a detailed audit of all its existing and planned roads and classified them according to various levels of sensitivity. A set of planning guidelines was then written for each sensitivity level, according to lighting type, location, the positioning of lighting columns, and permitted light leakage distances.

Over the next few years, Netivei Israel plans to replace its existing lighting stock with environmentally friendly lighting fixtures, in accordance with the professional specifications we developed during the project. A pilot is currently underway in a dark, ecologically sensitive area adjacent to Kibbutz Samar, where existing lighting is being replaced by environmentally friendly lighting.

*Mekorot:* Mekorot owns thousands of facilities across Israel. As part of the project, the facilities were classified according to various sensitivity levels, and different solutions for reducing light pollution were adopted for each level. These solutions included blacking out facilities (wherever this was possible from the point of view of operational and security requirements), to adjusting the type of lighting to reduce light pollution. As a first step, Mekorot has recently blacked out 33 facilities that are located in dark, ecologically sensitive areas in the center of Israel. A pilot is also underway to replace part of the lighting in Mekorot’s largest facility in Ashekelon with environmentally friendly lighting.

*Timna Valley Park:* Timna Valley Park is a tourist site in the Arava desert, where visitors enjoy local nature and other attractions. To protect the environment while developing tourism in the area, we have developed an environmental management plan for the Park that deals with issues including event management, the adverse effects of vehicle traffic, lighting, waste, conservation of natural runoff water, and ecological tourism.

Currently, Timna Valley Park is making adjustments to some of its garbage bins and lighting fixtures, per the project recommendations, and is in the process of replacing existing lighting fixtures at the Park’s entrance with environmentally friendly lighting.

*Milopri:* We developed guidelines for biodiversity friendly agricultural management processes in avocado plantations in the Western Galilee. The processes involve reintroducing local and endangered species, e.g. *euphorbia microsphaera Boiss*, to the plantation areas, integrating mixed ground cover vegetation in the avocado groves, reducing spraying, and even restoring a vernal pool in Kibbutz Shomrat.

Milopri is currently working with an ecologist, who will help implement the project recommendations.

Visit our TevaBIZ website to read more about our ecological risk management project for businesses.

**Working with Communities to Protect Biodiversity**

This year, we held our first BioBlitz—an intense period of biological surveying to attempt to record all the living species in a particular area--on the Caesarea sand dunes. The BioBlitz was a public event initiated by SPNI’s Carmel Field School, and took place over three days, during which we were able to observe and record this area’s incredible natural wealth. Participants were astonished to discover the enormous variety of wildlife hidden in the sand dunes. We intend to use the data collected during the BioBlitz for the statutory protection of this area.

Our main findings: we collected over 70 species of arthropod in 360 pitfall traps that we placed in a wide range of areas, in one of these we found a shrew. On the dirt tracks, we found over 13 species of animal, including cape hare, jackal, skink, Shreiber’s fringe-fingered lizard (an endangered lizard species), Eurasian stone-curlew, and Alectoris. Our camera traps documented golden jackal, wild boar, and Anderson’s gerbil. Our bat detector recorded Kuhl’s pipistrelle. Our butterfly survey found seven butterfly species: painted lady, large white, cabbage white, clouded yellow, green-striped white, bath white, and lesser fiery copper. Our reptile survey found reptiles including short-fingered gecko, Levant water frog, chameleon, and *chalcides*.

The construction of the new city of Modiin has shrunk the wildlife corridor in certain areas to a width of less than one kilometer. To ensure that this area remains suitable for wildlife connectivity, SPNI’s Modiin community teamed up with the Israel Orienteering Association to conduct a hazard-mapping exercise. After dividing the area into sections, the orienteers walked through each section and mapped hazards--including barbed wire fences, jagged fence pillars, and building debris—with the help of an app. The mapping exercise helped us clear the hazards to leave a clean, obstacle-free area for wildlife.

**The Young Wildlife Patrollers from Beersheba**

In honor of biodiversity month in Beersheba, a fourth-grade wildlife patrol group from Meitar conducted a species survey. The children searched for and identified plant and animal species with the help of field guide handbooks, and then documented them. Not only did these young patrollers learn about the local urban wildlife a short walk from their homes, the information they collected has been included in the wildlife field surveys that we conduct across Israel and will help us to map species and understand the human impact on them.

**I Saw A Turtle!**

Israel’s turtles are under threat. Please help us research and protect our precious turtle population by reporting any turtle sightings to us.

**Mapping Israel’s Anemones**

Thank you for sharing with us! Last winter, we asked you to take part in our project to map Israel’s anemones, to help us understand why their flowers bloom in different colors in different areas of the country. With the help of the hundreds of reports that you shared with us from across Israel, we were able to map our anemones. We discovered that red anemones, which are more resistant to dry weather, bloom in the south, and that anemones bloom in a range of different colors the further north you go. Please continue sending us your reports this year!

Click here to take a look at our anemone map.

**In the upcoming year, we will continue our work to protect open spaces. This includes lobbying for the regulation of wildlife corridors through statutory protection, effective field management, and addressing environmental threats. We will maintain public transparency, while raising public awareness and developing partnerships with communities to protect Israel’s nature and environment.**

**Renewable Energy**

**We promote policies to encourage the use of energy from renewable sources that do not damage nature and the environment. We support the government’s pledge to significantly increase renewable energy targets by 2030, to significantly reduce the use of coal, and to accelerate the transition to electric vehicles. We are advancing a national plan for solar roof panels that will reduce air pollution and greenhouse gas emissions.**

**Opposing Oil Shale Drilling and Shale Oil Production**

In recent years, the government has made a series of welcome, positive steps towards reducing greenhouse gas emissions and air pollution. However, at the same time, it has also given the go-ahead to 12 different oil and oil shale development initiatives in Israel.

These initiatives were the focus of a new report that we released at the 4th Israeli Climate Conference on November 4, 2019. While we are delighted that public awareness of the climate crisis is growing in Israel and globally—as reflected in a series of government decisions made over the past decade—we are also concerned at the large number of liquid fossil fuel exploration and development initiatives that are being greenlighted in Israel. This worrying tendency is reflected in the increase in the exploration and development of onshore oil reserves that require conventional or unconventional development, and of oil shale fields where overall production volumes could total hundreds of millions of barrels.

Some of these development initiatives pose a serious threat to quality of life, the environment, and ecosystems in Israel. We simply do not understand how these initiatives, which the government has approved, align with its commitments to reduce greenhouse gases and air pollution, or to the many positive steps it has taken regarding the environment in recent years.

Our report exposes the utter absurdity of the current reality, whereby the government is greenlighting environmentally damaging energy production projects while simultaneously promoting government initiatives and partnerships to reduce air pollution and greenhouse gases. SPNI calls on the government to freeze all shale oil drilling and exploration projects. To read the full report, click here.

**Supporting the Government’s Solar Roof Panel Project**

Our work with the Israel Electricity Authority to examine the potential for generating energy from solar roof panels was one of the key factors that inspired its public campaign encouraging Israelis to install photovoltaic roof tiles on private homes.

There are many financial benefits to installing the panels, including savings on the transmission line label, and reducing air pollution, living costs, and greenhouse gas emissions. In view of this, the Israel Electricity Authority has called on the owners of private homes with roofs to install solar roof panels and thus reduce their electricity costs or sell solar energy to the Authority.

To encourage Israelis to install the panels, and to provide the public with as much information as possible, we have joined forces with local authorities to organize open days around the country where we can offer information and advice and answer consumer questions. For more information about the information days, click here.

**This Just In: *There Is Something New Under the Sun!***

SPNI’s planning and birdwatching team have published a report examining the ecological sensitivity of Israel’s water bodies. The report found that solar panels, which generate renewable energy without damaging nature, can and should be installed on most of these, which together cover an area larger than the city of Tel Aviv!

The report was written in response to the many initiatives to install solar panels on reservoirs. We would like to direct these initiatives to reservoirs that are not ecologically sensitive and protect those that are. Under the National Master Plan, TAMA 10-dalet-10, no plan is required to install solar panels on reservoirs, just a building permit, which can be obtained from the Local Committee. The issue of installing solar panels on ecologically sensitive reservoirs often flies under the radar of environmental organizations, who are not aware of such schemes because they are dealt with by local and regional planning institutions.

Our report points out that, out of 4,200 artificial bodies of water in Israel, there are 4,016 with an area totaling some 53,000 dunams. This is five times the size of the solar field at Ashalim in the Negev, which at around 10,000 dunams is the largest of its kind in Israel, and larger than the entire Tel Aviv metropolitan area. Further, these sites are of no particular ecological importance, and energy panels can be installed on them without endangering the environment or wildlife. In contrast, however, the report found that there are 184 bodies of water, covering a total area of around 5,000 dunams, that are defined as areas of ecological importance and need to be protected from development of any kind. Ninety-seven of these bodies of water have high ecological importance and are located in the north of Israel. Of the rest, 51 are in the south of the country, 16 are in Haifa, nine are in central Israel, seven are in Jerusalem and four are in Judea and Samaria.

Israel’s artificial bodies of water are of high ecological significance, in particular for birds, including several globally endangered species. They are subjected to various development processes, including alterations to water, soil, and vegetation infrastructure, such as reservoir sealing and infrastructure development, and in particular the construction of floating solar energy facilities.

In order to formulate policies that will protect the ecological function of Israel’s water bodies and enable them to be put to optimal use, including for renewable energy infrastructure, we identified those of ecological importance, with a view to protecting them from any development that might harm their ecological function.

Click here for the full report.

**In 2020, we will continue to promote renewable energy production on roofs and other suitable spaces and will lobby the government to make a decision on this important issue. We will also continue to oppose onshore and offshore oil and gas drilling as part of our campaign to promote the transition to green energy.**

**Protecting Birds**

**SPNI’s Israel Ornithological Center was born at the end of the 1970s, a result of an initiative to protect eagle’s nests. Ever since then, the Center has undertaken research and field studies to protect the diversity of Israel’s avifauna. The Center’s main focus has been to protect at-risk species and their critical habitats. Time and time again we have been involved in public battles to protect our birds, and together with you, we have succeeded in achieving a number of important wins.**

Our biggest win this year on behalf of Israel’s feathered friends was the Northern District Planning and Construction Committee’s decision to overrule plans to erect 20 wind turbines in the Galilee, out of the concern that the turbines would harm birdlife.

The wind turbines were set to be erected in Ramat Sirin, an area designated as an open space with no construction--one of the largest remaining such areas in northern Israel. Ramat Sirin contains a wildlife corridor—a natural crossing area for wildlife. The Northern District Planning and Construction Committee ruled that the multiple adverse impacts of the wind turbines in this area, when balanced against their minor benefits, did not justify continuing with the plans.

**Vulture Poisonings in The Golan Heights**

In May 2019, 10 vultures in the Golan Heights —around half of the area’s total vulture population—died from poisoning.

Sadly, in Israel, there are almost no repercussions or enforcements to prevent poisoning. Despite hundreds of poisoning cases, in recent years almost no indictments have been filed against the alleged culprits. Even when punishments are meted out in poisoning cases, they usually only amount to token fines of several thousand NIS, which does not reflect the damage caused, and definitely does not deter potential offenders.

To fix this problem, SPNI and the Israel Nature and Parks Authority have initiated an amendment to the Wildlife Protection Law, which will be voted on by Members of Knesset when a new government is formed. We are calling for a clear and explicit ban on the use of poisons and pesticides when there is concern over harm to wildlife.

Current legislation does not include such a ban. The amendment proposes to prohibit the use of poisons and pesticides in circumstances where there is the potential to harm wildlife. Poisons in open spaces are a major cause of harm to wildlife. These poisons do not only kill the animals that directly consume them but also lead to the “chain poisonings” of animals that consume poisoned carcasses (a phenomenon known as “secondary poisoning”). This unpleasant phenomenon depletes wildlife populations and endangers rare species—and can also harm humans if they come into contact with the poisons.

According to the proposed amendment, if a poison or pesticide is dispersed on lands owned by an individual, or on lands for which that individual has right of use, such as grazing lands, that individual shall be deemed to have caused the dispersal or use of the aforementioned poison or pesticide unless he can prove otherwise. The amendment has been drafted based on background research and experience showing that in most cases it is landowners or those with right of use over a particular area that are responsible for commissioning the spraying or usage of poisons and pesticides.

**Counting Backyard Birds**

From January 16-26, 2019, we conducted our 14th annual Backyard Bird Survey, together with you, the public. The survey was organized by our Israel Ornithological Center, the Israeli Center for Yardbirds, and the thousands of Israeli bird lovers who helped us with this important project.

The data we collect during these annual surveys help us learn about changes and trends in bird populations. For example, we learned about the spread of invasive bird species in Israel (birds that were introduced to Israel from elsewhere, and which then escaped and began breeding in the wild) such as the myna, the rose-ringed parakeet, and the monk parakeet, and to understand whether and to what extent they impact on local species. We compare trends that researchers have found elsewhere in the world (like the decline of rose-ringed parakeets in the United Kingdom), with trends in Israel. Each year, more and more people are taking part in the survey and submitting reports. As well as reports from hobbyist bird watchers and professional ornithologists, we were delighted to receive reports from educational institutions and the wider public. The bird count data make a significant contribution to the development of citizen science in Israel and to nature conservation. We employ various methods to improve the reliability of the reports, including technology and also manual screening by senior ornithologists who discount any reports of rare bird species that are not expected to be in Israel in the season when the survey was conducted, or that are not found in the particular area where the report was made.

**This year we joined the global eBird online database of bird observations, to survey birds alongside tens of thousands of people from all over the world!**

eBird is a global online database of bird observations created by the world-leading Cornell Lab of Ornithology. In 2019, we reported 82 different species and a total of 336,57 birds. We found that the hooded crow is the most widespread bird in Israel—a phenomenon that we have also seen in previous years. The five species that we saw in the majority of our observations are widespread in human habitats thanks to the availability of food and the birds’ ability to adapt to changing environments. All five of these species were also at the top of last year’s list of most common species, in more or less the same order, which is indicative of the relative stability of the system and also of the reliability of the data, thanks to the statistical power of multiple observations.

**The Lesser Kestrel: No Longer Endangered**

Until a few years ago, the lesser kestrel was endangered in Israel and around the world--a result of shrinking habitats and pesticide use. In 1996, the Israel Ornithological Center began work to protect the lesser kestrel.

The Israel Ornithological Center’s flagship lesser kestrel initiative is a joint venture with the Alona Regional Council and “Porsim Kanaf” (Israel’s national birds of prey conservation project). The initiative comprises a community education project in the Alona regional school to protect the lesser kestrel’s main habitat in Israel. In recent years, we began a similar project in the Megido Regional Council. Today, partly as a result of these initiatives, the lesser kestrel is no longer considered endangered.

**Nature Defense Force for Birds**

This year, as part of the Nature Defense Force initiative—a joint venture between SPNI, the Israel Defense Force (IDF), and the Israel Nature and Parks Authority—we began a number of impressive bird conservation projects. These included an initiative to restore the common swift population in the Kirya and Sharona compounds in Tel Aviv. Common swifts are small, insectivorous flocking birds that spend most of their lives in flight. They arrive in Israel in the spring to breed and build their nests inside crevices in walls and under the cornices of roofs. However, modern buildings are unsuitable nest sites, because they are incompatible with the swifts’ unique flight form. To help the birds breed, IDF soldiers placed nesting boxes made from ammunition cases around the Kirya compound. The nesting boxes are especially tailored to the swifts’ flight form and thus enable them to fly in and out of the nests easily.

As part of a project to protect the bird species that breed around the Nahshonim kibbutz, IDF soldiers created nesting sites there for the lesser kestrel. This project also included advocacy education activities, such as observing and ringing birds, designed to increase awareness and sensitivity toward nature conservation among IDF soldiers.

Over the last 20 years, we have seen a 90% drop in the number of Lichtenstein’s sandgrouse in the Negev. One of the reasons for this sharp decline is contaminated sewage water, which the sandgrouse drink. As part of a project to save the sandgrouse population in the Shivta area of the Negev, IDF soldiers provide these birds with sources of clean drinking water, and raise awareness about the need to protect sandgrouse living within their unit’s firing zones.

**Champions of The Flyway: Breaking Records for The Sixth Time**

This year, the sixth annual Champions of the Flyway bird race took place in Eilat, alongside the International Birding and Research Center’s annual conference. Over 400 people from 25 countries attended the conference, with around 150 ornithologists and 30 teams taking part in the race, raising over $75,000 to protect Rift Valley vultures. The race generated lots of positive energy from all over the world, at the end of the conference we were showered with compliments and well-wishes from delegates, many of whom said they would like to return next year!

**Birdwatching Classes**

SPNI’s Israel Ornithological Center continues to educate the next generation of young ornithologists. Every year, we run birdwatching classes for children and young people. The classes are held in different areas of Israel and are taught by adult ornithologists with knowledge of birdwatching and of nature in general. During school vacations, young ornithologists from all over Israel get together to observe the country’s spectacular birdlife. If you haven’t joined them yet —why not do so now?

 **A Joint Venture with Salt of the Earth Ltd**

The Salt of the Earth company’s salt pools in Eilat and Atlit are an important stop-over and resting site for waterfowl during their annual migration. To help protect the salt pools, the Israel Ornithological Center has teamed up with Salt of the Earth to run a number of initiatives. This impressive joint venture has been ongoing for several years, and we are delighted to report some impressive results in the conservation of seagull nesting colonies in the salt pools.

**Our 40th Annual Birdwatching Seminar Day**

We ended 2019 with our 40th annual birdwatching seminar day at Tel Aviv University. Hundreds of ornithologists and bird lovers attended the day, which included a review of the status of birds in Israel over the last 40 years. The worrying data presented at the seminar means that we will have to rethink our direction of travel. Since 1979, six species of nesting birds have become extinct in Israel, including the bimaculated lark, Savi’s warbler, the lappet-faced vulture, and the bearded vulture. A further 65 bird species are endangered. We must do everything in our power to change this situation and save more species from extinction, so that generations to come can enjoy our country’s birds.

For Israel to become a good place for birds, we must protect their habitats, including large, continuous, open spaces, and their stop-over stations along migration routes; prevent the introduction of invasive species and pests and reduce the spread of existing ones; pass the amended Wildlife Protection Law, which first and foremost prohibits sport hunting.

**Over the next year, we will continue our efforts to improve the status of Israel’s birds—in particular those that are endangered—by actively promoting ways to protect threatened species, preventing the erection of wind turbines, mapping key bird areas, implementing the Red Book of Vertebrates in Israel (SPNI’s book classifying vertebrate species in Israel and identifying those under threat), and raising public awareness.**

**People and Community**

**SPNI is an organization of people. Our strength and power are built upon the shared efforts of a large community of people who love and are fascinated by nature. This community understands that we are living at a time when accelerated development, while necessary, must take into account our unique and precious ecosystems--the limited natural resources on which we depend and for which we are responsible. We are facing an unprecedented global climate and ecological crisis. It is vital that we protect nature now to ensure our own future. We would like to thank the hundreds of thousands of supporters who worked with us in 2019, and we call on all of you to continue to march forward with us—for all our futures, and for the future of nature in Israel.**

* ~35,000 households in Israel are members of SPNI.
* ~900,000 people have hiked with us.
* ~600 children have taken part in our summer camps.
* ~35,000 students have taken part in our environmental education programs.
* ~20,000 hikers took part in “Urban Nature Week.”
* ~40,000 hikers took part in our “Winter of Nature Conservation” event.
* ~120,000 people liked our page on Facebook.
* ~3,000 people follow us on Instagram.
* ~35,000 people subscribe to our newsletter.
* ~200,000 people visited our Deer Valley Park.
* ~23,000 people visited our Beit Ussishkin and Beit Levi Eshkol Visitor Centers.

In 2019, it was your support and your work with our communities that enabled us to achieve such incredible success.

One outstanding example of public support for nature conservation can be seen in the tens of thousands of hikers who attended our traditional Tu B’Shvat event in Modiin’s southern hills. They helped drive home the message that Modiin has incredible nature right at its doorstep, and that its southern hills must be protected from construction and development. The hikers also suggested alternative ways to develop the city that will not harm nature. In August 2019, a master plan for Modiin was issued, according to which the southern hills will not be earmarked for development in the near future. This is a very significant step towards protecting this wonderful area. We have already begun work to change the zoning of the southern hills, so that the area will be designated as a national park--a move that will ensure Modiin remains forevermore a city that safeguards Israel’s precious wildlife corridor.

Every weekend throughout February 2019, thousands of hikers came to learn about the unique HaSharon Park near Hadera and to support the work of SPNI’s Hadera community. They made it very clear that there must be no development on land between Highways 2 and 4, and that this beautiful area must be protected from construction for the sake of both nature and local residents.

In February 2019, some 6,000 people came out to support our opposition to the Rekhes Lavan building plan, which proposes the construction of a new, completely unnecessary, neighborhood at the expense of a spectacular natural area in Jerusalem that is home to many plants and animals. If it went ahead, the plan would destroy an area of publicly accessible open space and one of the most precious areas in the Jerusalem hills. Hundreds of volunteers went out in all weathers to recruit supporters, raise awareness, and sign petitions. So far, the fight has not been successful--but with your support we will continue to do all we can to preserve our wonderful nature.

At the beginning of December 2019, tens of activists attended a hearing in the Haifa District Court, where we had joined as a respondent to the petition filed by Yitzhak Tshuva against the Haifa District Committee’s decision to cancel his plan to build four towers on Haifa coast. This development would irrevocably destroy a strip of beach--and would even entail drying out a seabed to create a strip of artificial beach for construction purposes. We stood as a united front to make it clear to the Court that the sea and the beach are first-class public natural assets, a unique ecological environment, and a fertile and special habitat for a variety of organisms including birds, crabs, the endangered sea turtle, and unique flora. The beach is one of the most popular physically- and economically-accessible leisure sites for the Israeli public, and as our population grows, so too does the need for protected, open public beaches.

In Tel Aviv-Jaffa, we work with you—the public and local nature lovers—all across the Gush Dan region. Our activist groups continue to expand, and more and more people are joining our “environmental veterans” groups where they learn about the wonderful nature in this part of Israel. It is vital that we protect the “green lungs” of crowded urban areas like Gush Dan. Together, we learn about nature, and improve our skills and abilities, so that we can share the wonders of nature with an even wider audience.

In Beersheba, too, the local community is working hard to protect nature. Hundreds of local people took part in activities run by SPNI’s Beersheba community to conserve the city’s natural spaces, create a sustainable community, and to protect nature in Israel’s southern capital.

Thousands of young people all around Israel took part in activities organized by our Patrol Teams. This year, these committed teenagers organized grassroots activism projects that inspired and influenced decisionmakers and the general public. These young ecowarriors joined the fight to prevent the construction of new marinas on Israel’s beaches, and, undeterred by soaring temperatures in July, went out to talk to people who were vacationing on the country’s beaches to raise awareness of the movement to oppose the marinas.

This year, SPNI worked with the Israeli-Arab community across the country on various initiatives for people of all ages and backgrounds. We ran education programs for kindergarten children and schoolchildren, and worked with communities to create awareness of nature and the environment.

Throughout 2019, we continued to run our environmental educational programs in schools and kindergartens across Israel. Through our “Children Leading Change” program, children develop a sense of responsibility and belonging, and become agents of change who can influence adults. We worked with educators in their schools to help them embed sustainability values within the curricula, and to gain a green school accreditation certificate from the Ministry of Environmental Protection and Ministry of Education.

This year, we ran a new and particularly successful continuing education program for kindergarten teachers, which involved developing activities for preschool children in outdoor spaces and urban woodlands. The program enhances the children’s classroom education by helping teachers promote sustainable lifestyles through outdoor activities in urban nature, and by instilling children with knowledge, skills, values, and a sense of community. Every week during the school year, the children go outside and get to know nature near their kindergarten. They learn and explore in nearby urban woodlands or in another urban nature site. This outdoor experiential activity teaches them how to resolve ethical and moral dilemmas, face challenges, and find solutions. The out-of-class learning touches on a range of key educational topics, from core kindergarten subjects through local biodiversity. Topics covered in the learning include:

* the changes that take place in the woodlands throughout the different seasons;
* protecting and reusing natural resources;
* promoting environmental values and cleanliness;
* developing connections with animals and plants;
* developing compassion for wildlife in the woods;
* creating spaces for play and movement;
* discussing the role of the individual in public and community life.

The program directly links this outdoor experiential learning back to the children’s studies inside the kindergarten classroom, which empowers kindergartens to promote sustainable lifestyles. Within the kindergarten itself, educational staff, children, and parents work together to create spaces and activities that reflect what was learned outside, including unmediated play spaces with natural materials, a sensory pathway, a tea and relaxation corner, games and building in mud, an eco-garden, and a space for studying and watching birds. To strengthen ties with the local community and encourage other kindergartens to go outdoors, the kindergarten teachers also get involved with various initiatives and sustainability projects such as adopting local woodlands, planting local wildflowers and bulbs, and setting up reusable tableware kits that families can borrow for events, to reduce the use of disposable plates and cutlery.

Our outdoor and urban woodland activities for kindergarten children in Herzliya have been nominated for the Ministry of Education’s Prize for Unique Contributions to Education.

**Israelis For A Clean Israel**

This year we launched a public campaign calling on Israelis to keep our public spaces and green areas clean and tidy. In Israel, the problem of public littering is getting worse, and our urban and green spaces are becoming dirtier and more polluted. Israel’s natural resources and open spaces are shrinking, and if we do not work together now to create cultural change around public cleanliness, our country will soon become overcrowded and littered. Today, we have reached the point of no return, and we simply cannot carry on this way. This year, we started to work with you to create change. We still have a long way to go, and we have pledged to use all the resources at our disposal to bring about much-needed change in public attitudes to cleanliness.

In 2019, we joined forces with global civic movement Let’s Do It!, which works to create clean public spaces all over the world. Let’s Do It! connects volunteers and environmental organizations from across the globe, and creates communities that work together and learn from each other. In September, we took part in the movement’s global event, World Cleanup Day, and held a full week of cleanup activities, during which we were joined by volunteers and hikers from all over Israel. During the week, thousands of Israelis participated in environmental cleanup activities, and helped make Israel a cleaner and tidier place.

You are invited to join us-- click here to follow our activities on our Facebook group, “Cleanup Israel.”

We operate all over Israel, from our headquarters at 2 HaNegev Street in Tel Aviv, through our urban communities in large cities: Beersheba, Modiin, Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, Hadera, and Haifa. Our field studies centers are spread across various settlements: Kiryat Shmona, Ma’alot, Sakhnin, Ein-al-Asad, Hura, Ramla, Lod, and Eilat. Our field schools are located in Hermon, the Golan, Alon Tabor, Achziv, Hof HaCarmel, Ofra, the Negev Mountains, Shikmim, Ein Gedi, Hazeva, and Eilat. Our tour groups operate in Haifa, Tel Aviv, Modiin, Jerusalem, and Beersheba.

Come join us in 2020! Together, we will continue our work to create a better future, for ourselves and for generations to come.

Come join the SPNI community of friends, and make protecting nature a way of life.