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Urban forests provide hope for the Beirut River

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The Beirut River and the surrounding neighborhoods have long suffered from short-sighted policy and blatant mismanagement. The ecosystem was disrupted, and natural habitats have been destroyed. The #BeirutRiverForest project consists of planting trees on the banks of the river, as well as engaging with local associations, schools, and companies in developing a blueprint for the potential 'green corridor' of Beirut to emerge.



Aerial view of the Beirut River above Sin el-Fil area (Source: theOtherDada)

This area used to be the floodplain of the Beirut River, a fresh water source for the Roman city of Berytus (currently Beirut) and earlier civilizations. The ecosystem was a riparian one, of which we can still see a few kilometers. The area was slowly turned into farmland, and planted with aggressively invasive species, such as eucalyptus, that dried up the land. In the early 20th century, several waves of immigration resulted in informal and formal settlements in those farmlands. ^

For most of the 20th century, the banks of the river had been natural, providing the communities with ecosystem services such as fresh food and water, helping to regulate temperatures and snowmelt, supporting humans and wildlife habitats, and providing a space for recreation activities for people from either side of the river to enjoy. The Armenian water festival Vardavar and the Muslim Eid were celebrated together with different communities. Picnics, fishing, and boating served to bring people together as well.

A river of concrete

In 1968, the river was encased in concrete. Since then, it has lost all of its ecosystems – marking the death of the Beirut River. It also became disconnected from the communities, turning the area into a no man’s land. This has become a dumping site for waste – untreated industrial and residential sewage, solid waste, trash, plastics – all of which ends up in the Mediterranean Sea. What started as a local problem now has a regional impact. Italy’s fish come from the Mediterranean.

The Beirut River Valley is also considered a ‘Category 4 Important Bird Area’. Lebanon is the second most important flyway for migratory birds worldwide (<http://datazone.birdlife.org/birdlife-is-working-to-mainstream-soaring-bird-conservation-along-the-rift-valley/red-sea-flyway>), as birds traveling between Africa and Eurasia use Lebanon as a pit-stop during their migration (https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Bernd-Ulrich_Meyburg/publication/339780929_A_corridor_of_soaring_bird_migration_in_Lebanon_on_the_Eastern_corridor-of-soaring-bird-migration-in-Lebanon-on-the-Eastern-Mediterranean-flyway.pdf). Unfortunately, Lebanon has one of the highest rates of illegal hunting and trafficking of migratory birds. This makes the initiative to plant urban native forests all the more relevant – since hunting is not allowed in the cities, we could provide the respite and safe passage to migrating birds.

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– *Adib Dada*

Pollution failures

Greenpeace released a report called “TOXIC AIR: THE PRICE OF FOSSIL FUELS (<https://www.greenpeace.org/mena/en/appr/>)” on air pollution in June 2020 that ranked Lebanon as the country with the highest death rate due to air pollution (<https://storage.googleapis.com/planet4-mena-stateless/2020/06/d2f9f552-gp-mena-air-pollution-report-eng-june-2020-.pdf>) from the burning of fossil fuels in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. ^

From the perspective of an architect and planner working on regenerative practices, the transformation of the Beirut River from a natural ecosystem into a sewage infrastructure is fascinating. The challenges of this project have been many, especially the disinterest of the different ministries and institutions responsible for the river and the Beirut River watershed. Many proposals for tackling the systemic pollution of the river have been disregarded by the authorities as well.

What is needed was a more tangible, easier project, which would bypass the higher authorities and could nonetheless have a big impact. This is how the idea of planting Lebanon's first Miyawaki forest came about, with the more amenable mayor of Sin el-Fil, Nabil Kahhale (<https://sinelfil.gov.lb/>) (Mayor of Sin el-Fil since 1998), giving access to land.

Urban rejuvenation

Since the river could not be brought back to life, it was decided instead to rejuvenate the forest ecosystem, which used to exist on the banks of the river. The forest became a social space, bringing people back to the edge of the river. Indirectly, after attracting them back to this unloved area, people are noticing the river and questioning its state. Knowledge and understanding of a problem become empowering, with hopefully the admonition and persistence to take action collectively for the next generation.

Being on-site fills me with peace and hope. The transformation has been so quick, and the support of the community has been so overwhelming – we are on the right track.

– Adib Dada

Funding from locals as well as through a funding app – 'SUGi Project (<https://www.sugiproject.com/>)'. The main challenge has mostly been getting access to the land. As the project expands beyond the banks of the Beirut River, this has become extremely difficult. The authorities are not responsive, nor interested in the greater good, so it has been an uphill battle. This despite only asking municipalities to be responsible for watering the sites for two years. All of the fundraising, site works, and two years of maintenance is taken care of by the project with the help of volunteers. Eventually, with more pilots, there is hope that the project can get more visibility and interest from other municipalities and the Ministry of Environment.

Creating Shared Spaces

This project has achieved a lot, from being the first Miyawaki forest in the country, to a successful and replicable pilot project for cities in Lebanon and beyond. ^

As a next step, we plan to re-connect the Lebanese mountain range with the Mediterranean Sea with a green corridor along the Beirut River. On either side of the river, we will bring degraded lands back to life with trees and shrubs from native species. These reclaimed lands will serve as public areas for people to visit, walk, learn about and be around biodiversity. There will be public spaces, benches and signs explaining the different species of trees and shrubs. We envision the Beirut River Forest becoming the main green and blue artery of Beirut, bringing biodiversity into the capital, providing clean air and better health for locals, and reviving interest in nature and the water from the mountains.

Since then another initiative has been developed: theOtherForest, a nature-based tool for ecological and social regeneration in cities. Drawing from experiences around the Beirut River, the new initiative has been pitched to other cities of the MENA region, to replicate these forests and consider them as an essential tool to fight climate change. It can also protect and recreate biodiversity hotspots in cities – creating shared spaces for humans and other natural organisms to coexist and thrive.

A sustainable future

The enthusiasm of people for this project has been wonderful. People from a variety of socio-economic backgrounds have joined in the planting or maintaining of the forest, and press has been plentiful. People view tree planting as an inherently good thing to do, a harmless non-political act. But if these were the initial reasons for joining the project, they quickly discovered the therapeutic and ecological value of their act, and they keep on coming back for more, and advocating for similar projects in their own communities.



Personally, being on-site fills me with peace and hope. The transformation has been so quick, and the support of the community has been so overwhelming – we are on the right track.



Learn more about this project (<https://www.ser-rrc.org/project/beiruts-riverless-forest/>).

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Adib Dada is the founder of theOtherDada [tOD] Integrated Consultancy & Architecture. Based on Biomimicry, tOD's work promotes a symbiotic relationship between nature and the built environment by exploring new ways of creating projects with a positive impact. Adib was listed as one of GOOD Magazine's GOOD 100 for his project Beirut RiverLESS. Adib is a Fellow of the Middle East Leadership Initiative and a member of the Aspen Global Leadership Network. He is now active in rewilding Beirut by planting dense native urban forests in the city's leftover spaces.