

Rediscovering the Lost Lake

PUBLICATIONS
CORNER

Lake Hula, located in the Northern reaches of the Jordan River, served as the "limnological lungs" of the Jordan ecosystem since time immemorial. Teeming with luxuriant water-plants, fish and transient waterfowl, the lake was host to human hunters in the early Stone Age, when prehistoric elephants grazed near its shores. By the time Zionist pioneers returned to till the land, the lake and its associated northern swamps had shrunk to a comparatively small size (68 square miles), but seasonal overflows prevented regular agriculture throughout most of the Hula Valley. Furthermore, the swamp's rich, diverse wildlife included mosquitoes which carried malaria.

Despite the scientific community's misgivings about the long-term ecological consequences of annihilating some of Israel's most important wetlands, the JNF and the fledgling State decided to "sanitize" the Hula Valley, i.e., to completely eradicate the lake and its biologically diverse environs, replacing the "unhealthy" wetlands with 20,000 acres of "healthy" farmland (plus a small "nature reserve"). Little time was granted scientists to study the area or development plans (much less guide them); but an intensive series of "Hula Expeditions" did collect voluminous, if occasionally uneven, data and samples. However, the pressing needs of the new State and the Arab isolation of the Mount Scopus campus, where most of the expedition's samples were housed, prevented immediate publication.

Forty years later, Ch. Dimentman, H.J. Bromley and F.D. Por have taken up the challenge in this comprehensive paperback volume, **Lake Hula, Reconstruction of the Fauna and Hydrobiology of a Lost Lake**, published by the Israel Academy Press. All aspects of the lake receive their long overdue attention: hydrography, water chemistry, aquatic invertebrates, fish, amphibia and waterfowl (and their parasites), ecology, traditional uses, etc. The 171 pages of scholarly text are complemented by 31 figures and one plate.

The result is far more than an erudite catalog and exercise in "forensic limnology." Despite early high yields, the misused land began to claim its revenge. Fields began to subside as water was drained from the spongy peat deposits and irrigation led to salination of the soil. Where the valley's intense heat dried out the soil, peat fires and clouds of peat dust became common. Now the clock has turned full cycle and the JNF is spearheading efforts to reflood parts of the Hula Valley to restore ecologically valuable wetlands and to provide new educational, recreational and touristic opportunities.

Finding an acceptable balance between ecology and development has proven controversial. On July 7, 1996, at the invitation of the Israel Academy, ecologists, developers and other interested parties met to thrash out their scientific differences in an Academy-moderated forum on the topic, a major step toward closing the gap between their visions for the region's future. As the authors of this suddenly quite contemporary volume conclude: "This time, the knowledge of the past environment and the reasonably full picture of the original biodiversity of Lake Hula and of its swamps can supply the yardsticks for [proposed] restorational work." In the case of vanished Lake Hula, the past can and must guide the future.



The Academic Forum is published quarterly by the American Foundation for Basic Research in Israel, a non-profit, tax-exempt organization registered in the State of New York (USA).

The American Foundation for Basic Research in Israel (AFBRI) support the development of science in Israel and facilitates the participation of the international donor community in this endeavor.

The Foundation can be reached at: The American Foundation for Basic Research in Israel (AFBRI) c/o PDA, 25 W. 45th St., New York, NY 10136 Phone: (212) 840-1166, Fax: (212) 840-1514

Editorial Board: Prof. J. Jortner, Prof. J. Ziv,
Prof. A. Keynan, Dr. M. Zadok
Editor: Dr. I. M. Asher
Graphics/Printing: Unigraph