

# Expert urges joint effort to ‘green’ Middle East

**Nesher: Israel, Arabs have mutual interest in clean water, air**



Arie Nesher of the Porter School of Environmental Studies at Tel Aviv University spoke at Rutgers about the politics of the environment in Israel and the region.

Photo by Debra Rubin

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In the face of global warming, growing populations, and deteriorating water and air quality, the environment must play a part in future agreements between Israel and its Arab and Palestinian neighbors, according to an Israeli expert.

Dr. Arie Nesher, professional director of the Porter School of Environmental Studies at Tel Aviv University, said shrinking natural resources will harm both sides unless jointly addressed.

“We must have sustainable economic growth on both sides of the border taking into account the ecological system,” said Nesher, speaking Oct. 6 at Rutgers University’s Civic Square building in New Brunswick.

His talk was the annual Ruth Ellen Steinman Bloustein and Edward J. Bloustein Memorial Lecture. The program was jointly sponsored by the university's Allen and Joan Bildner Center for the Study of Jewish Life and the Edward J. Bloustein School of Planning and Public Policy.

Nesher urged negotiations based on principles of environmental justice and long-term thinking about resource management and urban development.

For example, the Mountain Aquifer — Israel's largest and cleanest water source between the Jordan River and Mediterranean Sea — provides drinking water to both Israelis and Palestinians. Yet vast amounts of untreated sewage are being dumped into it annually. Additionally Palestinians have tapped "a jungle" of illegal wells into the aquifer, further threatening the supply of potable water.

The Palestinian Authority and Israeli government must build a joint infrastructure to tackle the problem, Nesher said.

Similarly, the Galilee region is becoming more arid as a result of global warming, he said, and development of hotels and resorts by Jordan, Egypt, and Israel have further strained resources and reduced open space along the Israel's shorelines.

Booming population growth on all sides in the coming decades — particularly on the part of the Palestinians — will further strain energy sources and the demand for public land.

"The Gaza Strip today is one the most densely populated areas in the world," said Nesher.

### **Peace park**

Some proposals are on the table to change this, particularly the \$3 billion Red Sea to Dead Sea canal project, which would link the two bodies of water in a project involving Jordan, Israel, and the Palestinians.

"It's now being studied by the World Bank," said Nesher. "Its real goal is to bring water to Amman, Jordan, because in many neighborhoods they don't have water running 24 hours a day."

The project would include a large desalination complex capable of meeting 30 percent of the water needs of Israel, Jordan, and the Palestinian territories.

This projected "Valley of Peace" — a portion of which would run along the Jordanian border and touch the Palestinian territories — is being touted by the Israeli government.

Development would include convention and cultural centers, hotels, restaurants, parks, and lagoons and one of the largest botanical gardens in the world. Greenhouses would produce winter fruits and vegetables to be sold in the region and abroad.

A high-speed train line and elevated highway would run along the canal, transporting people and goods between the Dead and Red seas within an hour.

A cornerstone of the project, which has generated interest from firms around the world, is a proposal by Israeli billionaire Itzhak Tshuva to build “the Las Vegas of the Middle East,” including gambling casinos modeled after the American gambling mecca.

“The question is: Where are they going to get all the water?” asked Neshet.

Another concept is a “peace park” for recreational use by Israelis and Arabs in the disputed Golan Heights.

“These peace parks have worked before in other areas of the world — North and South Korea, Africa,” said Neshet. “In Ecuador and Peru it laid the groundwork for peace. This peace park can help build trust.”

Neshet’s talk was preceded by introductory remarks from Bildner Center director Yael Zerubavel and Michael R. Greenberg, associate dean of the Bloustein School and director of the National Center for Neighborhood and Brownfields Redevelopment

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## **Bloustein lecture series**

THE RUTH ELLEN Steinman Bloustein and Edward J. Bloustein Memorial Lecture was established in 1988 to honor the memory of the former president of Rutgers, who served for close to 19 years, and his wife, a pediatrician who was a clinical assistant professor at Robert Wood Johnson Medical School.

According to the event program, the annual lecture series is intended “to celebrate the values and interests Ruth Ellen and Ed cherished and cultivated through their lives.”

Lectures in the series seek to explore, variously, one of three topics: the preservation of animal species and the natural environment; celebrating love, happiness, and laughter as tools of clinical medicine; and exploring and promoting humane values, the theme of the 2008 lecture, “which Ed Bloustein believed were woven in the fabric of Judaic tradition and passed down from generation to generation.”

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