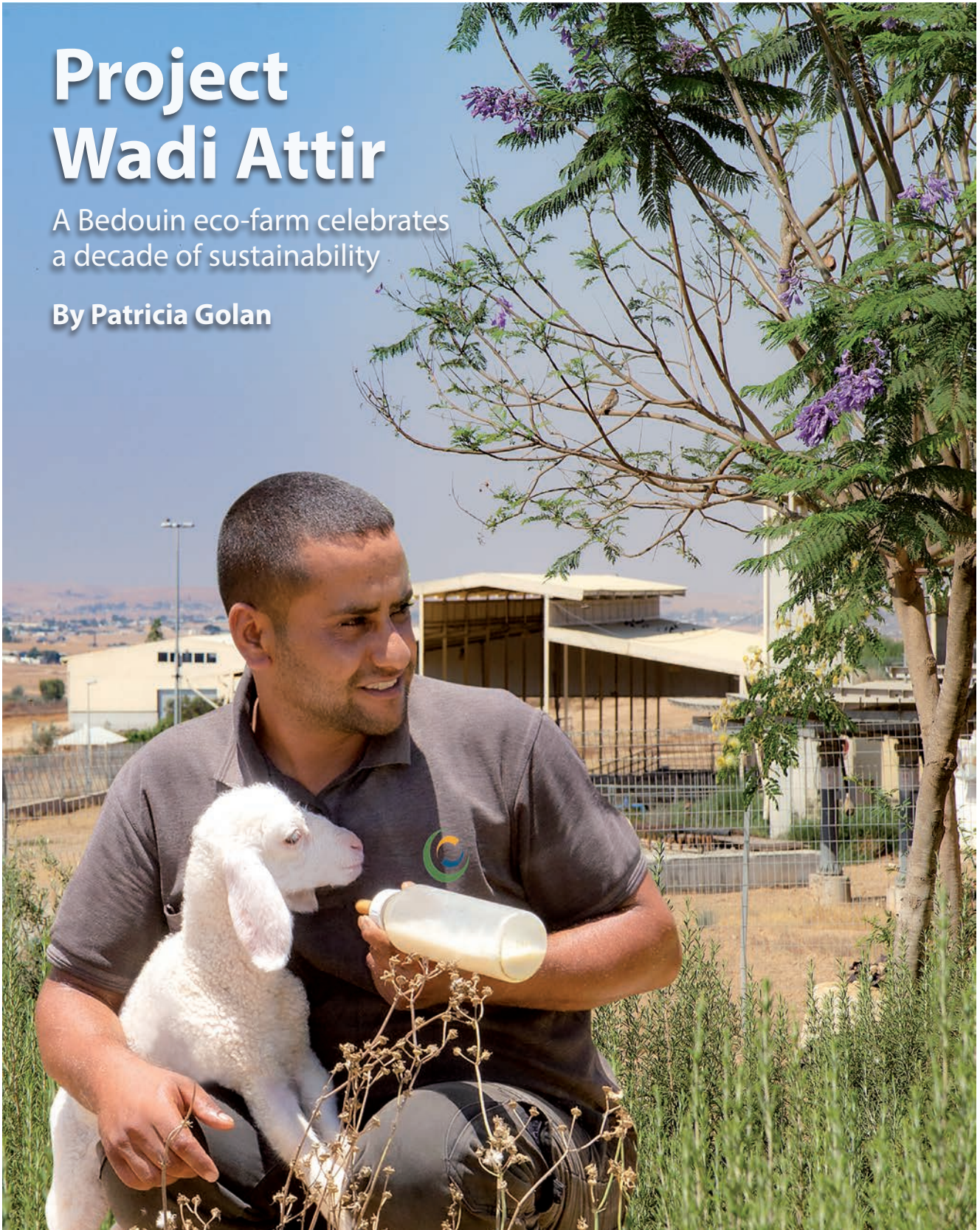


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# Project Wadi Attir

A Bedouin eco-farm celebrates a decade of sustainability

By Patricia Golan





From left to right: Project Wadi Attir's director-general, Lina Alatawna, with founders Michael Ben-Eli and Mohammed Alnabari

**IT WAS** an idealistic, ambitious plan few thought could actually get off the ground. The revolutionary project called Wadi Attir, now in its 10th year, is a sustainable eco-farm that combines Bedouin traditional skills and culture with modern renewable energy technology and farming techniques.

“Sustainability” is one of those trendy catchphrases that whatever the original concept seems to have lost its meaning. The common understanding of sustainability is a development approach which “meets present needs without jeopardizing the needs of future generations.”

The Project Wadi Attir model farm located on a 100-acre hilly site 10 miles east of Beer-sheba in the northern Negev is demonstrating that this is possible.

**HISTORICALLY, BEDOUIN** Arabs were desert nomads. For many reasons, including the influences of modern life, their extensive knowledge of the desert has gradually disappeared. Project Wadi Attir's primary objective is to preserve and nurture traditional Bedouin agricultural know-how, which includes sheep and goat herding, and dairy farming, growing medicinal plants and raising indigenous vegetables based on seeds from the area.

Visitors from abroad to Wadi Attir are often struck by a sense of incongruousness when they discover something so hi-tech and yet “artisanal,” so contemporary and yet so ancient. Seeing the farm complex today, a sort of modern oasis in the desert, it's hard to imagine what the area looked like less than a decade ago: a barren, degraded dryland, populated mainly by scorpions.

Today, thanks to a unique method of harvesting rainwater and planting, the area has

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Awad Allatrash, an employee of Project Wadi Attir, feeding a new lamb

been completely restored. There are thousands of trees and flowering plants, fields of crops, a thriving sheep and goat dairy with the most advanced milking facilities in Israel producing a range of products, and fields of native herbs from which soaps and teas are produced.

The site has an integrated system of green technologies for soil enhancement, solar and wind energy and bio-gas production, organic waste composting, and wastewater treatment and recycling.

But before all that, there was a concept.

Project Wadi Attir was the brainchild of Dr. Michael Ben-Eli, the Israeli-born initiator and founder of the project. Ben-Eli studied under and became a close associate of the renowned design guru Buckminster Fuller. He spent many years as a management consultant on issues of sustainable development to international agencies including the World Bank. But he became dissatisfied with “the large gap between the rhetoric of sustainability and what was actually happening on the ground.”

Sitting in Wadi Attir's spacious conference room, Ben-Eli said, “It's taken a long effort to come up with a new concept that is sometimes contrary to some projects that are being done around the world under the sustainability, or sustainable development, umbrella.”

These projects, he explains, “many of them excellent as far as they go, tend to focus on one issue or one sector. We wanted a

place that would give us enough freedom to define and demonstrate a comprehensive approach to development,” continues Ben-Eli, who, in 2008, established the Sustainability Laboratory in New York to devise a theoretical framework that could help address the real challenges of sustainability in a more holistic way.

The result was his “Five Core Sustainability Principles” that relate to the life, material, social, economic and spiritual domains. “The ‘material’ domain relates to how we deal with the physical world,” he explains. “‘Life’ relates to how we interact with other forms of life. ‘Social’ is concerned with how society organizes and governs itself. ‘Economic’ relates to what we can measure. ‘Spiritual’ asks what the fundamental values are that drive our actions – are we predators or stewards?”

The marriage of these principles and an actual project to showcase their application was born during a trip to Israel, when he saw the conditions of Bedouin living in the Negev.

“This was an area I used to know when I was in the army when there was no one here,” he relates. “Suddenly I saw all these incredible scenes of poverty, and dreadful shanty towns without water or electricity. It didn't seem right to me that there would be citizens living like this in Israel, a relatively advanced, wealthy country. On one side of the highway there was all this advanced technology and the university, and on the other side there was



Samira Abujouda (left) and Sabach Alatawna, both employees of the dairy plant, show off some of its products

all this hopelessness and no one was putting the two together.”

Here, Ben-Eli believed, was the perfect place to initiate a project to demonstrate the Lab’s approaches and principles.

“We thought if we can do it here we can do it anywhere,” he declares. “In developing Project Wadi Attir, we set out to produce significant innovations in relation to all the five key domains: on the material level, by showcasing an integrated infrastructure of green technologies; on the social, community level, by encouraging participation of people from different tribes and villages, focusing on empowerment of women, and experimenting with a cooperative structure; on the economic level, by going beyond mere job creation and establishing a group of entrepreneurs who develop, own and operate their own enterprises; on the life domain, by taking a humane, low-impact approach to raising farm animals and enhancing the biodiversity of a degraded site; and on the spiritual level, by anchoring the project in a publicly expressed value commitment upheld by the community.”

Armed with a concept and seed money from the US-based Arnow Family, Ben-Eli found an enthusiastic partner in Dr. Mohammed Alnabari, then the extraordinarily successful mayor of the Bedouin town of Hura and a leader of the Bedouin community.

“When I met Mohammed he immediately connected with the idea,” recalls Ben-Eli. The two formed a close friendship and working relationship.

The Arnow family, which for many years

has supported education and economic growth in the Bedouin community, provided major funding for the project. They were joined by other American donors, the Jewish National Fund, and eventually, though it was a hard sell, the Israeli government.

Joined by researchers from Ben-Gurion University of the Negev including professors Isaac Meir, Amit Gross and Stefan Leu, other technology experts and members of the Bedouin community, a project design team was put together. Chaired by Ben-Eli, the team produced the complex design for the ambitious project.

“While it is still a process, Project Wadi Attir is already a dream that has come true,” says Alnabari today, adding that when they first put their idea forward, no one believed it was a realistic proposal. “Today everyone wants to take credit,” he jokes.

**“WORLDWIDE DESERTIFICATION**, the expansion of deserts, has been a very worrying process” explains Prof. Isaac (Sakis) Meir of BGU’s Jacob Blaustein Institutes for Desert Research. “What we’ve managed to do here on this small piece of land is to reverse this process – instead of degrading the land, you start upgrading it.

“The concept of Project Wadi Attir that we adopted from the very beginning was that it would be a self-contained system in which there is no waste,” explains Meir. “One of the main issues in drylands is that you cannot afford to have any waste because they’re very poor environments. So the idea was to organize in a comprehensive way so that the waste

of each process would become the resource, the input of another process. So far we have more or less stayed within that concept.”

One of the guiding principles of Project Wadi Attir from the beginning was that women would not only be part of the project but would work together with the men as part of one team, and with responsible positions. Today half of the project’s 40 active team members are women.

The director-general is Lina Alatawna, a young Bedouin woman with advanced degrees in chemical engineering and industrial engineering. Her appointment last year was nothing less than revolutionary, since Bedouin society remains very patriarchal.

Alatawna grew up and lives in Hura. The site for Wadi Attir, which is across the highway from Hura, was chosen for the project because it was free from any ownership claims.

“Even though I’d been living five minutes away from Wadi Attir, I knew almost nothing about the project,” she says, interviewed in her office on the site. “When I heard about it, I knew it would be a really challenging job, something really new.”

She credits her family for supporting her studies and career. Her grandfather was the first Bedouin to send his daughters to study. She relates that her parents, both teachers, encouraged her to complete her studies and, unusually, have never pressured her to marry.

“I believe Lina’s success will have an effect on the whole social structure of Bedouin society,” says Shai Zauderer, a longtime member of the project team. “Her appointment was quite a significant step. Wadi Attir is now the flagship of the Bedouin community today, arguably the most prestigious project. You won’t be able to say women are inferior to men when a young woman is successfully running this project. She is very courageous.”

Alnabari concurs. “It was important that women be in decision-making positions,” he says. “Lina is the first Bedouin woman to head an important enterprise, and she competed with people from all over the country and won our support.”

Another young Bedouin woman involved with Wadi Attir is well-known geneticist Dr. Yasmeen Abu Fraiha, a member of the board.

“I think it’s one of the most amazing social entrepreneur enterprises in the Negev,” Abu Fraiha exclaims. “I love that it is pioneering in so many things, the fact that we use this



SHAI ZAUDERER

The operational area of Wadi Attir, with the solar panels in the foreground and the pans in the back

ancient Bedouin knowledge about herbs, medicine and sheep herding and combine it with very modern technology.

“This is a huge enterprise, but it’s just the beginning. At the start everyone thought it was just a crazy idea, but now Michael and Mohammed have proved that it works.”

Each year, Project Wadi Attir’s earned income has increased. Today nearly 50 percent of its budget is self-generated, with the remainder coming from government funding and philanthropy. It is now successfully marketing a range of products produced on the farm including soaps, teas, yogurt, *labaneh* and – the latest – honey.

The eco-tourism program for students and tourists has been growing steadily, with thousands of visitors annually from Israel and abroad. This past year the Education Ministry began supporting the agricultural farm. While there are several such schools in the country, this is the first Bedouin school of its kind, and schoolchildren of all ages come there to study. The project is also providing technical support to farmers and herders in outlying villages.

“In a limited environment we can create



SHAI ZAUDERER

Women work in the organic fields at Wadi Attir

something that is self-sustaining, and at the same time develop ideas and methods that perhaps individual farmers can’t do, but groups of farmers can integrate into their economies and upgrade their income and livelihoods,” adds Meir. “There is a lot to learn out of this, not least on the global scale.”

Ben-Eli says Project Wadi Attir will be

a model for other places. “This is what we wanted to do from the beginning, to do something for the Bedouin community but also showcase a model for sustainable development,” he concludes. ■

*Those interested in booking a guided tour of Project Wadi Attir can call 972-08-917-0040*