



SHORT COMMUNICATION

HIMA FOR PEACE: ACTIONS SPEAK LOUDER THAN BIRDS

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ABSTRACT

‘Al Hima’ which means a protected area or place is a traditional system of management of resources practised by indigenous people in the Arabian Peninsula.

This concept has been used by the Society for the Protection of Nature in Lebanon for conservation of Key Biodiversity Areas and as means of engaging and empowering the local community at its Hima sites. The Hima concept uses traditional, community-based approaches to conservation in order to achieve a sustainable use of the local, natural resources. Examples of the use of the Hima approach and the benefits it brings for nature and people are outlined.

Key words: Al Hima, Lebanon, traditional management, peace, community engagement

The Society for the Protection of Nature in Lebanon (SPNL), established in 1984 as a national environmental NGO, works to raise awareness of environmental issues and protect natural areas in Lebanon for the purpose of protecting birds, nature and biodiversity in collaboration with municipalities and local people. SPNL recognises the importance of involving local communities in the conservation of their natural resources. It has succeeded in reviving the Hima approach, a traditional system of resource management practised by the indigenous peoples to manage the rangelands in the Arabian Peninsula; ‘Al Hima’ means a protected area or place.

Upon the establishment of its Hima sites, SPNL has promoted Local Conservation Groups and Homat Al-hima (Hima Youth Nature Guardians); and empowered and supported them to protect and maintain nature, species and resources in the Himas. Thus, each Hima has a group of enthusiastic young protectors who aim to prevent illegal hunting and ultimately to conserve the ecosystem of the area.

The Hima approach concentrates on empowering the local community, by upgrading their livelihoods and promoting the sustainable use of natural resources. It serves as the bridge to achieve sustainable hunting, fishing, grazing and use of water resources. Thus, the

Hima concept creates a traditional and cultural community-based approach to the conservation of sites, species, habitats and people in order to achieve a sustainable use of the local, natural resources.

Promoting responsible hunting is one of the main goals of the SPNL mission, and awareness of the dangers of illegal poaching needs to be implemented throughout Lebanon, in the form of Responsible Hunting Areas, managed by a new generation of local guides and rangers, trained by SPNL experts and the Middle East Center for Responsible Hunting (MECRH) with support from BirdLife International, MAVA, CEPF, the EU Life Programme and BirdFair. In spite of its small geographical area, at least 401 species of birds have been recorded in Lebanon. The wealth and diversity of bird species makes this one of the principal assets of the country, but on the other hand amplifies the collective responsibility for their conservation.

SPNL in collaboration with the MAVA Foundation, Swiss Embassy, the Swiss Agency for Development & Cooperation (SDC) and Al Shouf Cedar Society (ACS) will be working together to unite the communities of the Shouf Mountain and West Beqaa to expand the territory of this Hima by merging the Shouf Biosphere Reserve with the west Beqaa Himas, sharing their resources for the benefit of both areas and over 20 communities,



Hills of Snow over Kherbet Qanafar © Mohamed Ali Haimour

representing over 6 per cent of the Lebanese territory and more than 5 Key Biodiversity Areas / Important Bird Areas.

Established in 1996, the Shouf Cedars Reserve is the largest nature reserve in Lebanon, accounting for approximately 5 per cent of the territory. It is located at an altitude of between 1000 to 2000 metres in the southern half of Mount Lebanon and includes the Aammiq Wetland in the Beqaa foothills and Qaraoun artificial lake, subject to a signed MOU with the Litani River Authority in 2019. The Shouf Cedar Nature Reserve encompasses the best remaining stands of cedar forests where over 160 species of birds have been recorded including a number of globally threatened birds, such as the greater spotted eagle, imperial eagle, corncrake and Syrian serin. In the West Beqaa Hima, 20,000 birds pass through the marsh in both spring and autumn, including white stork, white pelican, common crane and at least 31 species of raptor.

The Shouf project focuses on building ecological and socio-economic resilience to the impacts of anthropogenic and climate changes that are speeding up ecological degradation and biodiversity loss in the Shouf eco-cultural landscape. Improving scientific knowledge and gathering data on biodiversity indicators related to the eco-cultural landscape of the Shouf will

contribute to restoring nature and species. The new generations are at the heart of this project since they constitute the future of the reserve and are the protectors of their land. It is essential to educate them on the value of the eco-cultural landscape of the Shouf, through building a new generation of environmentally aware and conscious citizens proud of their land and ready to help restore its nature.

In addition, the project will promote green growth, economic diversification and infrastructures for biodiversity conservation and socio-economic development, building on the unique territorial identity of the Shouf and on the green growth opportunities offered by the production and marketing of agro-forestry products (medicinal, aromatic, edible plants, honey) and services (eco-tourism) with a special focus on the empowerment of women and youth, thanks to generous support from the Critical Ecosystem Partnership Fund (CEPF).

One such initiative is the production of a range of authentic, organic products using the knowledge of 'moune', the making of traditional preserves that has been crucial for the survival of local populations in snowy mountain areas for thousands of years. This project protects these traditional practices and conserves the know-how from generation to generation,

while providing an important source of additional household income. This generates money for women in particular, living in rural areas who don't usually have access to employment, and gives them influence, benefits and respect for their work.

SPNL is leading communities in organic farming and the growing of aromatic herbs. Organic production has always been at the heart of Lebanese traditions and should be revived and enhanced for health and environmental reasons. The West Beqaa Country Club, Homat Al-hima International Company and SPNL are now partners in a newly established butterfly garden in Homat Al-hima International Park, in the West Beqaa region, within the Hima Kheirbet Qanafar Key Biodiversity Area. Gift shops are one of the initiatives to protect know-how and help the community while representing the Lebanese culture. The gift shops will include locally and organically produced wine, olive oil, blossom and rose water, honey, pine nuts, and books and guides on 'Homat al Hima, the way of life, for sustainable development', posters, bird boxes and bird feeders, and other artisanal products from the Hima communities. The Hima gift box will be one of the initiatives in conserving Lebanon's traditions and keeping the Lebanese people in touch with their roots no matter where they travel.

Thus, the Himas complete the three circles of environment, socio-economic benefits and community. The ultimate goal in creating Himas is to bring peace to both humans and wildlife.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Assad Serhal studied ecology and wildlife management at Oklahoma State University. The Society for the Protection of Nature in Lebanon (SPNL) was co-founded by Mr Serhal in 1984 and he now serves as Director-General of the Society. His knowledge and passion for birds were the driving force for the establishment of Lebanon's first bird sanctuaries in the early 1990s. He lobbied for the creation of nature reserves, and for the establishment of a Ministry of Environment. Mr Serhal was awarded the Midori Prize for Biodiversity in 2018.



Moon Rising over Hills and Forests of Lala © Mohamed Ali Haimour

RESUMEN

‘Al Hima’, significa que un área o lugar protegido es un sistema tradicional de gestión de recursos practicado por los pueblos indígenas en la península arábiga. Este concepto ha sido utilizado por la Sociedad para la Protección de la Naturaleza en el Líbano para la conservación de Áreas clave para la biodiversidad y como medio para comprometer y empoderar a la comunidad local en sus lugares protegidos “Hima”. El concepto Hima utiliza enfoques tradicionales para la conservación basados en la comunidad para lograr un uso sostenible de los recursos naturales locales. Se describen ejemplos sobre el uso del enfoque basado en Hima y los beneficios que aporta para la naturaleza y las personas.

RÉSUMÉ

‘Al Hima’ qui désigne une aire protégée ou un lieu, est un système traditionnel de gestion des ressources, pratiquée par les peuples autochtones dans la péninsule arabique. Ce concept a été utilisé par la Société pour la Protection de la Nature au Liban pour la conservation des zones clés pour la biodiversité et comme moyen de mobiliser et de responsabiliser la communauté locale sur les sites de Hima. Le concept Hima est fondé sur des approches traditionnelles et communautaires de la conservation afin de parvenir à une utilisation durable des ressources naturelles locales. Nous décrivons des exemples d'utilisation de l'approche Hima et des avantages qu'elle apporte à la nature et aux hommes.