

Lebanon News

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New trails to draw ecotourists to Jabal Moussa



Joumana Asseily participates in the inaugural hike for the Peony trail at the Jabal Moussa Biosphere Reserve on Thursday. (The Daily Star/ Betsy Joles)

JABAL MOUSSA, Lebanon: Five new hiking trails were inaugurated in the Jabal Moussa Biosphere Reserve Thursday with a celebration of the initiative that is intended to promote conservation and tourism. A winding 40 kilometer ride from Beirut to the Jabal Moussa reserve, on the western Mount Lebanon chain, is a welcome respite from the urban Lebanese landscape.

The new hiking trails are part of the Association for the Protection of Jabal Moussa's ecotourism project, designed to showcase the area's beauty while bringing sustainable growth to the seven surrounding villages. Visitors can now make nearly a full loop around the mountain of Jabal Moussa, along ten different hiking trails, "which is a dream of ours," Pierre Doumet, president of APJM, told the Daily Star.

The smell of fresh zaatar signals the beginning of the reserve's most recent addition: the Peony trail, with its entrance – the highest-altitude trailhead in the reserve at 1,400 meters – situated in the village of Qehmez. As a group of around 50 hikers made their ascent Thursday, the dusty terrain turned green, with pops of bright yellow Spanish broom nestled in the crevices of massive boulders.

The five new trails were created with the support of Lebanon Industry Value Chain Development, a USAID-funded program aimed to improve economies and create job opportunities in rural areas.

Part of the UNESCO Man and Biosphere program since 2009, the Jabal Moussa reserve contains over 750 species of flowers and trees. “The essence of the biosphere program is [that] it’s a program for man to protect his own nature,” Doumet said.

In addition to engaging in conservation, the biosphere employs people from nearby villages and sells locally made products.

William Butterfield, director of USAID Lebanon’s economic growth office, said the project is an investment in rural tourism. “By creating trails like this, you’re providing access to these goods and services that are being produced by the rural economy that people otherwise didn’t have access to or didn’t know about,” he said.

Elie Khalil was born in Qehmez and started working for the reserve in 2010. He now leads groups on hikes from the Qehmez entrance. A big part of the ecotourism project, Khalil said, is convincing locals that conservation and tourism are both positive things.

The concept of ecotourism isn’t something most people in the village accepted right away. “It’s a new way of thinking here,” he said.

The biosphere concept depends on locals embracing the reserve’s mission, which hasn’t always been easy. Georges Tohme is a botanist and member of the Lebanese National Council for Scientific Research who studies biodiversity in the reserve. “When we came for the first time, everybody was against us,” he said. Tohme said much of their work in this crucial area for studying native species has been focused on promoting conservation to village residents. “We want everybody to try to keep the environment as it is. As rich as it is,” he said.

Along the hike, Khalil pointed out stone inscriptions dating back to the era of Roman Emperor Hadrian, and talked about local species of wolves and boars.

As this particular trail winds down into a valley, the vista opens onto a vast sand quarry standing in stark contrast to the nature the biosphere seeks to preserve. A major source of

wealth in the area given their importance to the construction industry, quarries exemplify how the priorities of the reserve and some locals may differ.

Doumet said the biosphere is working to promote the ecotourism program to locals as a financial boon. "You just convince people that they can actually make some money ... by being part of the program," he said.

With the opening of the new trails this year, Khalil's job involves clearing trails and making the area tourist-friendly. "It's sustainable work," Khalil said. Sustainability is not only a factor for the environment but also for the local people, who Khalil said have started to warm up to the biosphere idea. "They start to understand that there is a big, attractive thing here in their villages that they didn't know before," Khalil said.

With 19,000 visitors to the biosphere in 2016, up from 300 in 2009, the ecotourism program continues to grow with support from European embassies, development organizations and private donors.

Doumet said the project would be most sustainable if locals got fully on board. "We want people to actually want to protect their environment. But to want that, they need socio-economic benefit," he said. The next phase of his ecotourism program is to work with locals to open bed-and-breakfasts throughout the reserve, where visitors could stay.

"Our effort is to keep at least part of this place virgin and pristine for future generations. That's the biosphere reserve's call[ing]. But you need to convince people that it's worth doing."