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## Jabal Moussa mountain to become ecotourism center

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BEIRUT: The mountain of Jabal Moussa will soon be welcoming tourists from around the world after the launch of a campaign to encourage ecotourism and protect biodiversity. The campaign was launched on Friday by the Association pour la Protection du Jabal Moussa (APJM), with the collaboration of the Italian Development Cooperation Bureau and the Italian emergency program ROSS.

Italian Ambassador Gabriel Checchia was present at the ceremony held at Hotel Francis in the town of Al-Ghineh in Mount Lebanon. He said the role of the campaign was to help develop and improve the living, economic and social conditions of the locals through encouraging gender equality and the protection of the environment.

Members of APJM also explained that the campaign sought to protect biodiversity, discover sites of cultural value, support the local community, create jobs for the locals and achieve sustainable development. This is the first environmental campaign in the Kesrouan region and will aim to protect biodiversity, organize environmental activities throughout the mountain, utilize local traditional houses as rest stops for tourists and support local products.

APJM president Pierre Doumet stressed the importance of the campaign in protecting the environment and boosting social and economic growth in the region. He said that protecting nature did not imply eliminating mankind.

"The concept of a biosphere reserve consists on finding a balance between biological, cultural and historical values on one hand, and encouraging sustainable development and a local income for the residents of the area on the other hand," said Doumet.

Jabal Moussa was named a UNESCO biosphere reserve in February 2009, making it the 553rd reserve of this kind in the world, the 24th in the Arab world and the third biosphere reserve in Lebanon after the Chouf Reserve and the Jabal al-Rihane Reserve.

Located on the shoulders of the western slopes of the northern Mount Lebanon chain, Jabal Moussa spreads over an area of 1250 hectares and is home to some 83 species of birds – seven of which are endangered. It was named an International Bird Area last May.

The mountain is also home to wolves, hyenas, hyraxes and reptiles and is renowned for the unspoiled historic Adonis Valley, with its ancient agricultural terraces and trails that date back to Roman times.

Nonetheless, illegal activities including the rock and sand quarrying, burning trees for coal, the arbitrary cutting of trees and hunting constantly threatened the mountain, said executive director of APJM Cesar Abu Khalil.

APJM, an NGO founded in 2007, aims not only to protect the environment of the region but also to support the local residents through this campaign: one future project will be to register a trademark for Jabal Moussa, allowing locals to place it on their products and therefore possibly increase the product's value.

The NGO collaborated with the Universite Saint-Joseph to conduct a poll in several Jabal Moussa villages to better determine the living conditions of the locals and consequently help resolve their problems.

"Field work started on October 10 and has included 358 houses so far," said head of the social studies department at USJ Roula Abi Habib Khoury. – **The Daily Star**