



A woman in a purple shirt and white hat is looking out over a rocky landscape. A man in a tan hat is standing next to her, looking down. The background shows a vast, hilly landscape with dense green vegetation under a clear blue sky. The foreground is filled with large, light-colored rocks.

Hiking with Adonis

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Journalist

Lebanon's Jabal Moussa Biosphere Reserve

In Lebanon, mythology is history and geography, and a hike into nature can also be a journey into the collective memory of the nation.

The youngest of the country's three UNESCO-designated biosphere reserves (as well as a Protected Forest and a Global Important Bird Area), Jabal Moussa, located on the western slopes of northern Mount Lebanon and overlooking the Mediterranean, plays host to a variety of stories and legends along with an impressive range of biodiversity, a handful of traditional villages and, most recently, small groups of hikers intent on discovering it all.



Visitors meet up with local guides trained to point out the many animals, birds and plants common to the area, as well as several cultural sites, including the ruins of 200-year-old houses and the much older Roman Stairs and Hadrian Inscriptions. (Hadrian ruled the Roman Empire for more than 20 years around 100 AD, and his inscription ordering people not to cut down four economically important species of trees can be interpreted as one of the earliest official policies of conservation.)

Ecological diversity arising from variation of altitudes (1,500-meter-level difference) paired with cultural wealth distinguish the majestic mountain in Kesrouan from the country's other biosphere reserves, the Shouf and Jabal al Rihane, says Diane Matar, environmental officer with the three-year-old Association for the Protection of Jabal Moussa that is administering the reserve.

While the origins of the mountain's name are unclear, Jabal Moussa looks down on the valley where the Phoenician and Greek god Adonis, the goddess Astarte's lover, is believed to have perished, gored by a wild boar.

"The legend says that the blood of Adonis ran into the [Nahr Ibrahim] river, and it became all red and some of the flowers bloomed at this time," Matar says. "And now, they say that each year Astarte [Aphrodite] comes back spiritually, and she cries over his death, and because of some natural chemical phenomenon, the river actually goes reddish... People say that this is the blood of Adonis."

The association's president, Pierre Doumet, has long been familiar with the area's treasures, but a dramatic event inspired him to gather a group to protect them. One day in July 2006, Doumet came out of his house facing Jabal Moussa and "I saw the mountain blowing up," he recalls. Although Lebanon and Israel were at war at the time, the explosions had a more mundane cause: efforts to create an access road and, while doing so, to illegally extract rock and sand from the mountainside. Doumet and a few others went to the Maronite Patriarch and successfully appealed to rent the land for a period of 18 years with the aim of protecting it from destruction and rehabilitating land already damaged by quarrying and hunting.

Their overall aims, however, are even more ambitious and wide-ranging. Matar explains how the association is currently working with the support of the Italian embassy to develop a sophisticated eco-tourism program. They have partnered with St. Joseph University as part of a UN-supported project to create a tree farm that will yield an initial class of 5,000 trees for replanting and sale. And they want to develop kiosks where villagers can sell traditional handicrafts and food preserves.

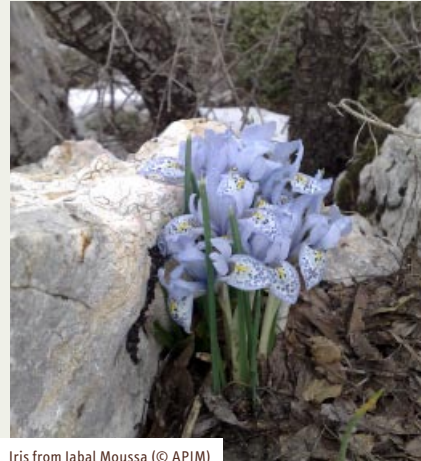
According to Doumet, eco-tourism and conservation need one another. "If you only have conservation, people get really upset around you because they don't benefit from it," he says. "If we have very moderate and civilized eco-tourism, then people have something to gain. The villages benefit from it, and visitors see what's going on and will report any abuse."

It took Jabal Moussa only three months to be named an official biosphere reserve, when it usually takes much longer, and the honor has put pressure on the association to live up to expectations, Matar says. She's pleased by the quick pace of development and the attention it's eliciting from others in the field. "Some people are even saying, [the reserve] is like a baby born with a PhD," she adds with pride.

"It's always like 'mission impossible' in this association, and they end up succeeding, so you feel that it's destiny."



House in Yahchouch (© APJM)



Iris from Jabal Moussa (© APJM)



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