

INTRODUCTION

The December 2010 Mt. Carmel forest fire caught Israel off guard. The speed with which the flames moved, their ferocity and destructive force, was stunning: 44 people were killed and more than 17,000 had to be evacuated as the blaze swept into a nearby kibbutz and residential neighborhoods, destroying or damaging nearly 250 structures. The firestorm also damaged famed Hai-Bar Nature Preserve: some of its 600 hectares were among the 2,200 that were charred, constituting one-third of the forest cover along the Carmel range. The aftermath was stark, the *Jerusalem Post* observed: “Entire mountainsides that were once green are now black with the skeletons of burnt trees pointing into the sky” (Waldoks and Rabinovich 2010).

Nearly as unsettling was the firestorm of public opinion that erupted even before the inferno had been suppressed. Most commentators focused on the failure of Israel’s firefighting operations and the resulting (and for some embarrassing) need to seek international help to extinguish the blaze; others blamed miniscule budgets and political factors for crippling firefighters’ ability to respond quickly and effectively. No surprise, calls for the resignation of key cabinet officials followed suit. But largely absent from this anguished handwringing and contentious debate was an acknowledgment of the critical role of fire in the Mt. Carmel ecosystem. Although this particular conflagration was ignited by humans (though the culprits have never been conclusively identified) displaying gross negligence that led to a horrific loss of life, it is also true that these forests are fire adapted, a consequence of biology and history, of natural and anthropogenic sculpting across thousands of years (Naveh and Carmel 2003). That being so, these ecosystemic realities and historical forces must guide policy makers as they craft new fire-management practices in the

aftermath of the tragic Mt. Carmel fire; if they do not, some of its key lessons will have been lost (Orenstein 2010).

Taking environmental history seriously is not simply a matter for policy wonks. This relatively new academic discipline can claim broader significance, a result of its multidisciplinary perspective: because it focuses on the reciprocal relationship between the natural environment and human development, and on how this ineluctable connection has changed over time, it offers unique insights into dynamic co-evolution of land and life. Fire, flood, and drought; grassland, forest, and soil; minerals, water, and animals—whether wild or domestic—are among those factors that have shaped, often definitively, the contours of human action. Put another way, environmental conditions influence the way human societies emerge—their economies, spatial organization, and carrying capacity depend in part on the sites in which they are located. Yet humans also have the capacity to manipulate the environmental conditions that confront them—agriculture, resource development, and lines of trade and transportation are but some of the ways that we have fundamentally changed the world around us.

This interplay, everywhere manifest in the Mt. Carmel fire, is yet another reason why it seems so imperative to study the environmental history of Israel. Although the nation is relatively young, its modern emergence has depended on a rich and conflicted past that has deeply influenced how contemporary Israelis live and imagine their connection to Eretz Israel. For more than a century, the associated zeal and visions of its Jewish settlers have complicated their struggle to reach an appropriate relationship with the natural world: To conquer or to respect? To exploit or to cherish? To pave or preserve? Israel moreover is home to people who have been informed by widely disparate sources, cultures, and ideologies. These include biblical narratives and cutting-edge science; Zionism and universalism, Judaism and Islam; ruralism and urbanization; socialism and capitalism; industrialism and deep ecology; altruism and greed. Such dialectics color the present environmental paradigms that jostle together in Israeli society and make the overall narrative all the more captivating, troubled, and complicated.

That said, there has been no sustained attempt to capture the environmental history of Israel, the dilemmas and difficulties that have shaped how its people, past and present, have tried to make their way in this oft-harsh land. Our goal for this volume has been to do exactly that: to offer a compendium that ranges from the biblical era to the twenty-first century, with a particular emphasis on the past 150 years or so, covering the geographic area of modern Israel.¹ For this ambitious task, we tapped a talented team of scholars whose chapters are designed to stand on their own. Among those contributing are

emeritus and senior professors who have reflected on a lifetime of scholarly research. They have been joined by retired government policy makers who provide an inside perspective of how Israel's environmental regulations have evolved, as well as by younger scholars offering a fresh set of interpretative insights born of their differing life circumstances. Also contributing are activist professionals, here commenting on the challenges that face those seeking a more habitable, just, and sustainable landscape.

The chapters in this book are largely written by people who not only are qualified to write about Israel's environmental history but to a large extent have been involved in creating it. Rather than try to avoid such potential biases, we have embraced this familiarity, this subjectivity, as an advantage. Several of the chapters have been crafted to exploit their authors' personal experiences, supplementing objectivity with a human touch. These writers have synthesized their passion for the subject with scientific and historical data, which when combined with their learned reflections on policy conundrums, political debates, or public concerns, deepen our understanding of how complex it has been for Israel—and by extension for any country—to live more lightly on the land.

The book opens with two chapters covering the environmental conditions in Palestine under the Ottoman and the British colonial rulers, thereby establishing the terrain that greeted early Zionist immigrants to Israel at the beginning of the twentieth century. The next set of chapters surveys the rise of the Zionist movement to the present and are framed around individual resources and issues, from population, water, and open space to rangelands and biodiversity; from marine policy, desertification, and environmental politics to Israel's Arab community and environmental law. The final chapters address current environmental dilemmas and their deep historical roots, including examinations of the Israeli military's environmental impact, transboundary environmental issues, diplomatic implications of international environmental conferences, climate change, and national land-use planning. A final chapter reflects on some of the major challenges that are confronting the Israeli environmental community now and will continue to do so.

This broad coverage, illustrative of environmental history's multifaceted and interdisciplinary character, pushes beyond conventional and more narrowly scientific or sociological analyses to better explain the antecedents of Israel's environmental achievements and crises. And while it is true that the ideas that emerge from this collection to a great extent depend on the eye of the beholder, that perspective is also confounded by its contributors' conviction that no single vantage point can do justice to such a complicated set of histories. The implications of grazing in Palestine and Israel, for example, are

interpreted quite differently in three separate chapters by Seligman, Kark and Levin, and Tal. Likewise, Tal and Yom-Tov provide differing reactions to the impact of forestry on Israel's ecosystems. Other instances of contrasting and complementary perspectives run throughout the volume: Schorr and Brachya on echoes of British policy in Israeli policy; Han and Orenstein and Silverman on the impact of Bedouin settlement in the Negev; Kerret and Adam on Mediterranean environmental conventions; and Schoenfeld, Michaels and Alpert, and Orenstein and Silverman who offer diverse interpretations of the historical sources and social, cultural, and intellectual significance of the modern Israeli environmental movement.

While environmental history as an academic discipline has had a profound impact on the historiographical analyses of European and North American studies, the same cannot be said for Israel; to date, its environmental history has received but modest attention. Part of the reason for this lacuna is that there is relatively little formal scholarly literature dedicated to the topic and few classes either at the undergraduate or graduate level. The only comprehensive coverage, by Tal (2002, 2006), poses a challenge and opportunity for this book's authors to set a new tone and focus for the writing of Israel's environmental history in the coming decades. We hope that by involving an eclectic group of writers whose interdisciplinary perspectives mirror the field's intellectual sweep, this anthology will contribute to introducing Israel's environmental history to a wider, even international audience. We recognize that its subject matter is so broad as to make any single text inherently incomplete, but we also believe that this book lays some of the groundwork for future interrogations of Israel's compelling and turbulent environmental history.

By almost any criterion, the State of Israel is not a normal country. The fact that much of its geography is familiar to the billions of people worldwide who know the Bible, or that it is deemed a "Holy Land" by four of the world's major religions,² conveys an unusual status. Over a century of ongoing political and territorial dispute is reflected in the disproportionate (and sometimes obsessive) news coverage that Israel receives. This long litany of religious, military, cultural, economic, and ecological encounters is packed into a landscape that encompasses a mere 22,000 square kilometers. Invariably, visitors are surprised at just how small and vulnerable the land of Israel is. Like longtime residents, they too are often amazed at just how far back one must go to comprehend the environmental pressures, historical factors, and social structures that have shaped—and have been shaped by—the landscape, its natural resources, and human communities. In Israel, the past matters—an argument this volume affirms anew by setting its tumultuous history into an evolving environmental narrative.

NOTES

1. The current edited volume deals primarily with Israel within the pre-1967 borders, unless ecological realities demanded a broader geographic context that includes those territories occupied in 1967.

2. To the oft-mentioned Islamic, Christian, and Jewish faiths, we add the Bahá'í faith; Israel is home to their international offices and most significant shrine (in Haifa) and tomb of the founder of the religion (in Acre). It is especially appropriate to mention the Bahá'í in an edited volume on Israeli environmental history, as their international center and shrine in Haifa, with its elaborate gardens, have become the signature landscape of the city.

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