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This past year has been a complicated one – marked by the global COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic affected many aspects of our lives, our shared planet, and the conservation of biodiversity. In this issue Ms. Yuval Zukerman tells us about how the lack of visitors to popular reserves in the Negev affected ibex activity in them. Dr. Victor China mirrors these explorations in the coral reefs of Eilat – exploring lockdown effects on reef fishes there. Unfortunately, the 'anthropause' and COVID-19 more generally also had a lot of negative effects on nature – especially where great reductions in ecotourism hamper many important conservation initiatives. This is both due to great reduction in income from ecotourists, laxation of enforcing of conservation regulations and laws, and reductions of monitoring of trends to nature.

To all of us feeling a bit overwhelmed and helpless in the face of all these major global events – this issue's spotlight on Prof. Uri Shanas and his work should serve as a beacon of light. His important work to popularize conservation means we can all - also through his TiME initiative – help protect the most endangered global habitats. The amazing work done by Uri and many other dedicated Israeli conservationists (see below for some recent conservation publications by Israelis), fills me with hope.

As you may remember we were due to hold the 3rd Israeli Conference for Conservation Science (ICCS) this spring. Nevertheless, as we do want to make this event an in-person one, we will delay it for the time being, and are exploring several options and dates for it. We promise to keep you informed as it materializes.

Let us hope we will all be able to meet soon and promote conservation together!

Uri Roll

Spotlight on Prof. Uri Shanas: A Conservation Activist

By Amir Lewin

Prof. Uri Shanas was not born an activist; that passion would develop later in life. Uri, however, was born a biologist. Drawn to the nature of coastal southern Israel where he grew up, he would spend his days wandering outdoors, exploring and investigating, often returning home late with snakes and spiders in hand, to the consternation of his siblings, who were not born biologists. Today, Uri resides further north, closer to the Carmel Mountains, although the desert remains his strongest passion. He attributes the relocation to his wife, as well as his position as an associate professor at the University of Haifa-Oranim.

These days he spends time walking with his newborn grandchild (aptly named Carmel) in the oak forests near their home, representing some of the few nature reserves and open spaces remaining from the period of his childhood. Most grandparents will recognize the experience of reflecting on their lives as they perceive the world through fledgling eyes. “I’m astounded at how drastically the landscape has changed, yet marvel even more at how people have acclimated to less and less nature,” says Uri. “I mourn this loss for the sake of my grandson, who will never know another environment, and wonder still how the world of his children might appear.”

The present world, which we ourselves have inherited during the Anthropocene – the age of man – is a new epoch driven by human activity transforming more than half of the land on earth and indirectly affecting everything else including its biodiversity. “We are confronted by this force everyday; many of the homes we live in and the roads we travel on were erected in the place of former winter pools and coastal sandy habitats,” says Uri, who recalls viewing one of the region’s last bearded vultures for example, long extirpated (except for a cherished photograph that Uri still keeps) and today supplanted by parakeets and other invasive species.

The undeniable fact of this human impact and Uri’s intrinsic love of nature is what motivated him towards conservation activism. His guiding principle, and one that follows his every email signature are words by Albert Einstein, “Those who have the privilege to know have the duty to act.” In keeping with this ideal, during his doctorate studies he became a founding member of the Israeli Union for Environmental Defense (*Adam Teva V'Din*) – a legal organization, to campaign against the Trans-Israel Highway (among other causes) and the environmental damage in its wake – while managing to be arrested by the police on three occasions. Concerned about the possible reproach for neglecting his research, he was instead encouraged by Yosi Terkel who told him that this fight was more important. Uri is still grateful for the support from his former supervisor, and others such as Yoram Yom-Tov. “In fact, the Department of Zoology at Tel-Aviv University is rooted in a history of activism.”

Another of its members, Amotz Zahavi, he regards as a personal mentor. Zahavi, already a renowned researcher, resigned from Academia for some time to focus on his conservation work, and formed the

Society for the Protection of Nature in Israel (SPNI). He calls Zahavi "a true environmental activist" and feels a kinship with him; Uri too has sacrificed time and energy away from his earliest passion for science – writing papers, teaching, mentoring graduate students, submitting grant proposals. "We need to make personal sacrifices. What is really lacking from the global environmental movement, and young activists on the streets, is that most merely call on the government and others to act, without embodying these changes themselves."

Upon returning from a post-doc at Columbia University, and resuming his academic career, Uri would follow in the footsteps of his mentor by joining the board of the SPNI, and later chair the scientific committee of the Green Movement Party. "Certainly there is a dearth of national representation for environmental and progressive issues to confront Israel's and the world's environmental crises. The most challenging of these are biodiversity loss and climate change – these issues are more important than anything else." With the words of Einstein about action resounding in his mind, Uri began formulating a plan to protect the world's most biodiverse and threatened lands.

The idea was to raise private funds to purchase these valuable and vulnerable assets, known as biodiversity hotspots – diverse ecosystems covering less than 2.5% of the planet's surface yet supporting over 60% of the world's terrestrial life. Funds for specific land parcels would be allocated equally according to individual members' votes and donations, regardless of contribution sizes, a means of democratizing stewardship, ownership and responsibility for these precious resources. Once the idea was realized in 2015, the organization would be named TiME – This is My Earth – although the organization could also appropriately be called, "This is *Our* Earth." With the aid of co-founder and environmentalist, Alon Tal, they would recruit a scientific committee and board of eminent experts from diverse research and cultural backgrounds to evaluate and select appropriate lands for proprietorship. Additionally, they would collaborate with local environmental groups and indigenous communities – a means of fostering both long-term success and viability in their endeavours to preserving biodiversity, and counteracting an old school of environmentalism founded on colonialist and often racist perspectives.

A year later, TiME (a non-profit organization) successfully purchased its first parcel of land in El Toro Forest, Peru through crowdfunding and other grants, and transferred with the assistance of a local NGO to members of the Yambrasbamba Campesino Community. This part of the Peruvian Amazon is home to the critically endangered yellow-tailed woolly monkey. Such flagship species are often used in conservation practices to galvanize public perceptions and garner donations, while also utilized as an umbrella for the preservation of lesser-known biota and their respective habitats. Uri was filled with immense pride and self-actualization when he visited this 66 Hectare tract of forest, the culmination of a decade long vision and a lifetime of environmentalism, involving thousands of contributors. Other land parcels acquired by TiME over the years since then are too remote to personally observe, and instead reliant on a network of local communities and supporters for their management and continued success. Concurrently, on a personal trip to Kenya several years ago, Uri was heartbroken to discover only upon arrival that a candidate area for preservation there had already been sold to regional developers, further emphasizing the urgency of his mission.

Returning home again to our precious parcel of land, which in fact is recognized as part of the Mediterranean Basin Biodiversity Hotspot, Israel too has had its share of conservation successes as a consequence of activism, and its failures. Its first nature reserve was co-established by Uri's mentor, Zahavi, in a small fraction of the Hula Valley in response to the drainage of this natural wetland and vital causeway for migrating birds. In contrast, anyone who has travelled over Israel's many roads will realize that Uri's campaign to halt the construction of the Trans-Israel Highway ultimately failed, but only after reaching a verdict by the land's highest court. Since then, however, Uri was instrumental in the preservation of the Samar Sands in the southern Arava – a vital habitat to desert species. More recent success stories include the protection of the Sasgon Valley and Palmachim Beach from

development led by local activists Yaniv Golan and Adi Lustig, respectively – reinforcing the power of environmental activism.

Sadly, as is clearly evidenced from the shifting landscapes and decline of species from Uri's childhood in Israel and around the world, the struggle to protect nature from habitat destruction is an uphill one. When asked how he feels about our ability to face these most urgent challenges of sustainability, climate change and biodiversity loss, Uri thinks of his grandchild and responds, "I'm scared to death, which is what drives me to action, and if more of us act, then I'm optimistic we can succeed." Let us hope for the future of all our grandchildren that his vision prevails.

Go to TiME in order to become a member and select the next biodiversity hotspots to be saved in 2021

COVID-19 restrictions reveal the costs of ecotourism: Behavioural adaptation of Nubian ibex in Ein Avdat National Park

By Yuval Zukerman

There is a lot of debate on whether the restrictions that the COVID-19 pandemic imposed, benefit nature conservation or hinder it. One thing is certain though – when crowded national parks and reserves were suddenly closed or restricted to few visitors only, we had a unique opportunity to examine the impacts of ecotourism on wildlife. Under the supervision of Dr. Oded Berger-Tal from Ben-Gurion University, and in collaboration with Zehava Sigal of the INPA, I investigated the impact of visitors in Ein Avdat National Park in the Negev on the threatened Nubian ibex (*Capra nubiana*). Ein Avdat serves as a major water source for a plethora of species, which rely on its springs to survive in the harsh desert environment. It also attracts a large number of visitors who come to enjoy its natural beauty and its inhabitants. Only 9 km from Ein Avdat lies Ein Shaviv – another important water source in the same arid region, but unlike Ein Avdat, it is difficult to access and therefore only a relatively small number of visitors arrive there. Thus, while the number of visitors in Ein Avdat dropped dramatically due to the COVID-19 restrictions, Ein Shaviv was not affected by the COVID-19 regulations.

We placed motion-activated trail cameras during the spring and summer of 2019 and 2020 in front of the water pools in Ein Shaviv and in Ein Avdat,

Ein Avdat

Nubian ibex in Ein Avdat

which are known as main drinking pools for the Nubian ibex. We found that in 2019 (before COVID-19 changed our lives) ibex in Ein Avdat arrived to drink close to 17:00 – when visitors to the Nature Reserve need to leave it, while at Ein Shaviv they arrived mainly at the hottest hours of the day, around noon. In 2020, when the number of visitors in Ein Avdat reduced (during the COVID-19 restrictions), the ibex arrived much earlier (a little after 15:00 on average). Nevertheless, in Ein Shaviv we found no such change in arrival hours. We also examined the kids-to-females ratio in the ibex populations coming to drink at these sites, and found that in Ein Avdat the ratio in 2020 was more than twice as large than in 2019 (0.25 in 2019 and 0.58 in 2020), while in Ein Shaviv it almost did not change (0.49 in 2019 and 0.46 in 2020). This means that recruitment of ibex in Ein Avdat was much higher in 2020 compared to 2019. While we cannot completely rule out environmental explanations, we hypothesize that the stress caused by visitor presence[1] in Ein Avdat combined with the delay in drinking hours and the restricted access to high-quality food[2] that is found close to the water, may contribute to an increase in abortion rate or a decrease in mating success of the local population in Ein Avdat[3]. Consequently,

significantly lowering ibex annual recruitment when the nature reserve is fully open to visitors.

Ein Avdat has been a popular and crowded tourist site for many years, and local ibex have become tolerant to the presence of visitors over time[4]. When we observe such a wild animal being so indifferent to humans, we get the impression that the ibex are unaffected by human visitation. Our study reveals that high tolerance does not necessarily mean that the population is not negatively affected by ecotourism. However, despite the possible negative effects caused by adaptation to human disturbance, behavioural adaptations are necessary to survive in a world where human population is constantly growing and expanding in space. This is especially true in arid areas, where oases are rare and extremely important for the existence of many species. The bottom line is that although they might come with heavy costs, behavioural adaptations allow for coexistence between wildlife and humans. It is our responsibility then to understand the consequences of these behavioural adaptations and to adjust our management schemes accordingly, so that both wildlife and humans can enjoy the resources nature has to offer.

Yuval Zukerman is a MSc student in The Conservation Behavior Research Lab, Ben-Gurion University

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Reduced human activity in shallow reefs during COVID-19 impacts on fish biodiversity

By Dr. Victor China

In a recent study in collaboration with Dr. Uri Roll, Prof. Jonathan Belmaker, and Dr. Assaf Zvuloni, we followed changes in fish biodiversity during the first COVID-19 lockdown and after human activity returned to its normal levels.

We collected data on fish species and abundance using GoPro cameras, which were deployed in three shallow habitats (designated entrances to the sea, near these entrances, and shallow knolls) along the Red-Sea coast of Israel. The cameras recorded 4K video, from which we measured the maximum number of individuals per species.

To analyze the data we examined changes in species richness across the spatial scale of our study area using rarefaction curves (curves that describe the accumulation of species as we add sites or individuals) and modelled the accumulation of species in different ways to understand if observed changes in richness occurred due to the size of the species pool (total richness), the relative abundance of species, the number of individuals, or due to intraspecific aggregation.

After comparing each of the three habitats (entrances, near entrances, and knolls) during and after the lockdown we found that at the entrances, in which the human activity is most intensive, there was a significant difference in species richness. We found a significantly lower number of species after the lockdown. This decrease in species richness was due to changes in distribution of individuals between species. During lockdown the distribution was more even relative to after the lockdown. Interestingly, there were no changes in the total amount of individuals or in the spatial aggregation of individuals. We did not find any changes in the knolls, where human activity is less intensive. We also found that the "near entrances" habitat after the lockdown, in which human activity is also less intensive, was similar to the "entrances" habitat during the lockdown – suggesting a strong relationship between the intensity of the disturbance and measured species richness.

Our findings suggest that disturbance due to human activity is probably, at least to some extent, reversible: fish shift their activity to nearby habitats where disturbance is low, and when human activity decreases they move back into the disturbed habitat. This is probably possible because human activity is limited to specific areas (entrances), which are limiting the disturbances to a very small portion of the total habitat.

Entrance habitat

Near entrance habitat

Knoll habitat

Victor China is a post-doc Fellow at the Ben-Gurion University, and the Inter-University Institute for Marine Sciences in Eilat.

Recent conservation publications by Israeli scientists

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Announcements

For information about the oil cleanup and how to volunteer:

- EcoOcean – Caring for the Marine Environment
  https://www.facebook.com/ecoocean.org
- Israel Nature and Parks Authority (INPA)
  https://www.parks.org.il/new/zihum-zefet/
- Mediterranean People
  https://www.facebook.com/MediterraneanPeopleIL

Conferences

- Israel Nature and Parks Authority (INPA) online conference on conducting conservation in Israel – 8-9 March, 2021 (9:00-12:00 each day)
- The Israeli Association for Aquatic Sciences (IAAS) Virtual Seminar Series – 8 March, 2021 – Plastics and Platisphere by Prof. Linda Amaral
  https://us04web.zoom.us/j/76399508130?pwd=bW4wUCs0WnRueUFjTit1WjEyZUxpZz09
- European Cetacean Society Webinar – 15-19 March, 2021 –
  https://www.europeancetaceansociety.eu/ecs-webinar-2021
- Conference on Animals in Visual Culture and Materials – 5 May, 2021 – call for abstracts
  http://www.bezalel.ac.il/news/item/?id=3040
- Design-Tech 2021: Design and Technology in Ocean Research – 19 May, 2021 – call for abstracts
  https://designtech.net.technion.ac.il/חדשות/כנס-ימי-design-tech-2021/
- Human-Animal Relations: Opportunities and Challenges in Changing Realities – 1-3 June, 2021 – call for abstracts
  https://in.bgu.ac.il/humsos/soc-ant/DocLib/חיה אדם יחסי כנס קורא קול 2021.pdf
- Israeli Society of Ecology and Environmental Sciences (ISEES) Conference – 7-8 July, 2021 – call for abstracts
  https://www.isees.org.il/
- International Congress for Conservation Biology (ICCB) – 12-16 December 2021, Kigali, Rwanda – Call for Abstracts, Symposia, Workshops, Roundtable Discussions and Training Courses
  https://conbio.org/mini-sites/iccb-2021/program/session-types

The Conservation Toolbox Project:

The Conservation Toolbox Project is a new international and multi-agency initiative aimed at creating an online platform that will connect conservation practitioners, educators, and students with the latest tools and methodologies generated and supported by researchers from diverse disciplines. This experts' community will cover disciplines from economics to ecology, anthropology to entrepreneurship – all of which lend methodologies to modern, integrative conservation.

To successfully achieve this, we need to thoroughly understand the needs of conservation implementation communities, so that we can produce an interactive online interface that is intuitive, useful, and helps these communities learn and employ relevant tools and techniques to solve their real conservation challenges.

Help us build a better toolbox by completing this survey:
https://wmsas.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_cw2dabkfuExEHPv

Thank you!
Oded Berger-Tal, Ben-Gurion University

MOOC – Massive Open Online Courses

- Air Pollution – a Global Threat to our Health (University of Copenhagen via Coursera)
  Starts: Mar 1st 2021
  Ends: Mar 21st 2021
  https://www.coursera.org/learn/air-pollution-health-threat

- What is Climate Change? (University of Colorado Boulder via Coursera)
  Starts: Mar 1st 2021
  Ends: Mar 21th 2021
  https://www.classcentral.com/course/what-is-climate-change-22468

- Climate Change and Water in Mountains: A Global Concern (University of Geneva via Coursera)
  Starts: Mar 1st 2021
  Ends: Apr 11th 2021
  https://www.classcentral.com/course/climate-changes-mountains-water-10522

- Environmental Challenges: Human Impact in the Natural Environment (University of Leeds via FutureLearn)
  Starts: Mar 8th 2021
  Ends: Mar 28th 2021
  https://www.classcentral.com/course/environmental-ethics-human-impact-6376

- Ecology: Ecosystems Dynamics and Conservation (American Museum of Natural History and Howard Hughes Medical Institute via Coursera)
  Starts: Mar 8th 2021
  Ends: Apr 11th 2021
  https://www.classcentral.com/course/ecology-conservation-10618

- Valuing Nature: Should We Put a Price on Ecosystems? (University of Exeter via FutureLearn)
  Starts: Mar 29th 2021
  Ends: Apr 11th 2021
  https://www.classcentral.com/course/valuing-nature-should-we-put-a-price-on-ecosystem-10579

- Marine Protected Areas (IUCN Papaco via MOOC conservation)
  Starts: Apr 12th 2021
  Ends: Jun 14th 2021
  https://mooc-conservation.org/courses/course-v1:mooc-conservation+marine-areas+2021_T1_EN/about

The Israeli Chapter of the Society for Conservation Biology (ISCB) is a professional non-profit organization that aims to promote the science of conservation. It is affiliated with the SCB and is managed in accordance with its goals and guidelines. Members of the ISCB are practitioners, academics, and all other individuals interested in the multi-disciplinary field of conservation.

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Dr. Uri Roll (President);
Dr. R.G. Bina Perl (Secretary);
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If you would like to share your thoughts and comments with us, and contribute to the ISCB or to our future newsletters, then we would be happy to hear from you. Please send us your conservation news and research updates.

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