

Marking an era

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Ra'anan Boral, THE JERUSALEM POST

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As a broad, member-based environmental non-profit organization, The Society for the Protection of Nature in Israel (SPNI) is frequently in friction with developers.

In many cases, developers simply ignore the message, choosing to respond by attacking SPNI for opposing their project or merely for stating its position. In this case, the debate heated up, offended specific individuals and diluted SPNI's environmental message.

In Gail Lichtman's article about the proposed Eden Hills community, an SPNI employee expressed personal criticism against new immigrants. SPNI does not stand behind such views and regrets their publicity and any offense they may have caused.

I take this opportunity to apologize to anyone who may have been offended, and to present SPNI's case on this issue.

One hundred years ago, the building of new communities determined the actual physical nature of what was to become the State of Israel. Fifty years ago, these communities determined the borders and boundaries of that State.

And today?

Attitudes toward new communities have changed. Today, Israel's physical, environmental and social needs are different than they were 50 or 100 years ago.

In July 2002, the government decided to establish 13 new communities. Today, three and a half years later, the planning authorities have either subsequently rejected or frozen most of these proposals. This reflects a

radical change in policy towards what is known as the most conspicuous physical element of Zionism

In the early '90s, all of the most prominent officials and scientific experts participated in an unprecedented project, known as "Israel 2020," that thoroughly examined Israel's land-use policy. The study was based on the fundamental principles that land is Israel's most vital resource and that the state cannot develop land in a wasteful manner because land development is irreversible.

In 2000 about 15 percent of the country's land was covered by concrete and asphalt. Projections showed that if Israel continued to act according to the "business as usual" scenario, the amount of built-up areas in Israel would double within 25 years, leaving insufficient open spaces for human beings and nature in the near future.

Most of the Negev is not and will not be developed due to military training needs. This leaves a very small parcel of land to sustain a country.

Thus the planning administration prepared an alternative development policy, which was approved by the government in the mid 1990s. One of the plan's components included a complete halt to building new communities and concluded that additional building would be implemented in, or as a supplement to, existing communities.

SPNI's environmental interest in this policy lies in the fact that it will result in larger areas of natural open spaces.

Yet this issue, like others in Israel's public policy, continues to be debated. Some organizations, such as the Israel Lands Administration, regional planning councils, and the Ministry of Agriculture, continue to support and promote new communities, in blatant disregard of official policy.

This is the reason that some environmental organizations, such as SPNI, find themselves in conflict with these various governmental and public agencies.

Five years ago, SPNI initiated a campaign to ensure that the policy would be implemented and observed. Although SPNI's campaign has been successful

in many instances, several proposed new communities remain under consideration.

Paradoxically, some of the most controversial developments are billing themselves as "ecological communities," seemingly oblivious to the fact that even a new community aiming to conserve water or energy is inflicting irreversible damage to the most strategic and finite physical resource Israel has - land.

Two examples will illustrate this issue:

### **The case of Michal on Mount Gilboa**

The community of Michal is planned for Mount Gilboa, the only place in the entire world where the endangered Gilboa Iris can be found. This new community would be in close proximity to three already-existing communities, which have used only 25% of their potential housing units.

Due to lack of thorough knowledge regarding the distribution of the Gilboa iris, some of the relevant planning committees initially approved the new community.

The young, enthusiastic future residents of Michal were very aware of the environmental sensitivity of the site and promised that their community would be environmentally friendly. Yet in a survey conducted last season by the Nature and Park Authority, more than 1,000 irises were found in the northern section of the planned community.

This new situation, in which the "ecological community" will surely inflict irreversible ecological damage, has caused great embarrassment. We have good reason to believe that approval of this new community will be retracted in the near future.

### **The case of Eden Hills**

Eden Hills, a new planned community in the Eila Valley southwest of Jerusalem, has already been approved by the government and several planning committees and is also being marketed as an ecological paradise.

And again, this planned community raises the problem of loss of land, fragmentation of open spaces, and, in this case, a significant barrier to a strategic ecological corridor, where animals travel from one place to

another. The developer has denied that the proposed community will harm the wildlife corridor.

The community has been planned to conserve water and energy. This is certainly a move in the right direction, but it fails to address Israel's main problem - the issue of irreversible loss of open spaces in a very small country.

SPNI is in favor of new immigrants coming to Israel. However, Israel does not have the privilege of building new communities for them - or for anyone else. A sustainable-minded government must direct all developers and newcomers to strengthen existing communities that so badly need a "transfusion" of new people and new ideas.

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