



The Youth Forum for Environmental Education

The Youth Forum for Environmental Education is a program designed to promote environmental citizenry among Israeli junior and senior high school students, both Jew and Arab, religious and secular, immigrant and native born, as the environment sees no cultural or religious differences, and therefore all must work equally to protect it. The Youth Forum is conducted under the auspices of the Israel Society for Ecology and Environmental Quality Sciences, Israel's oldest ecological society. Every four years the society holds an international conference, with speakers from all over the world in attendance. At the International Conference in 1996, the Youth Forum made its debut. Students from twenty junior and senior high schools, who had participated in an annual competition, presented their models for an environmentally enlightened community.

Since the program was initiated, it has been tremendously successful. Its unique elements include support from industry (Intel, Netafim) and government (Environment and Education) under the auspices of a non government organization. It is unique in the sense that it allows students in high school and junior high to prepare a project and present their ideas to an adult audience, all experts in the environmental field. The fact that this project instills environmental consciousness in the students was shown at this year's conference. Over 1,200 students displayed great effort with their educational projects and enthusiasm vibrated in the air.

The Youth Forum program leads to community outreach as well. During one year's competition, a school in Lod invited the mayoral candidates from that city to present their platforms for environmental protection, demonstrating that the environment is an important issue to the country's youth. Another year, a group of eighth graders distributed refrigerator magnets to their community, advising them to buy only environmentally friendly products, and explaining how to determine whether or not a product is environmentally friendly.

The Ministry of Education has lauded this community outreach approach and, together with the Ministry of Environment, has asked the Forum's advisors to reach out to communities outside of the mainstream such as the Arab town of Taybe, and Bedouin communities; communities who have very little invested in environmental education. One of the best projects was created by a Bedouin girls' high school. The young women, who attended the competition in traditional headscarves, created beautiful papier-mache objects out of recycled paper in order to teach elementary students about recycling.

The participation of students from many different backgrounds brings home the lesson that environmental protection crosses religious and cultural divides. To this end, the program invests heavily in what is often called pluralism. We have religious

and secular schools working together, immigrants alongside native-born Israelis, as well as Arab, Druse, and Israeli Jewish children working together. These informal meetings allow students from different backgrounds to understand another group's culture, and encourage pluralistic thinking, not in the artificially induced atmosphere of a "pluralistic" get together, but rather as a natural spin-off of environmental awareness. Given this country's harsh reality, the Youth Forum meetings are one of the few opportunities for these young people to meet someone who is culturally and ethnically different from themselves, in a context that emphasizes their shared humanity.

Some of the best examples of the programs' cross-cultural success are the Lod-Taybe partnership and that of Kfar HaYarok and Rahat. For the past three years, the Orthodox Jewish Boys Middle School in Lod has conducted a joint project with the Agricultural School for Arabs in Taybe. Seventh graders in the two schools worked together to create and execute projects throughout the year. The students arranged meetings with one another, alternating locations, and maintained phone contact throughout the project's gestation.

The Levi Eshkol School in Kfar HaYarok (a typical middle-class Israeli school) organized an extraordinary joint project with the students at the middle school in Rahat, a Bedouin community in the northern Negev. After studying waste and recycling, a young woman from Rahat, who studies in the school in Kfar HaYarok initiated a program where the students from Kfar HaYarok traveled to Rahat to discuss their research with the students there, received feedback and thus improved their projects. As a result of these joint projects, students from both sectors benefited from the joint activities, learned about one another's culture and maintained contact even after the project drew to a close.

Participation in the Youth Forum provides both veteran and immigrant Israelis with the opportunity to meet one another outside the confines of the classroom, and is therefore an excellent opportunity for newcomers to integrate into Israeli society. In addition, by studying the local environment, immigrant students learn more about their new homeland. This "hands-on" approach is often more effective than straightforward classroom learning. By creating projects that benefit the environment, students, both veteran and immigrant, are imbued with a greater appreciation for their country, as they have now worked to help protect it.

The project has influenced its participants to such an extent that a group of seventh and eighth grade students, all Youth Forum participants, opened an "Eco-Shop" in their Tel-Aviv school, where they sell only environmentally friendly products. Products are sold at reasonable prices in order to encourage environmentally friendly consumerism among students and teachers. By illustrating the value of purchasing environmentally friendly items, students are able to recognize and measure value through a different set of standards. The project did not start with the school administration, but with the students themselves, a clear example of the effect of the Youth Forum competition creating a trickle-up effect, spreading from students to teachers and parents, families and communities.

This year the Youth Forum has a special opportunity to make it into the international spotlight at the Israel Society for Ecology and Environmental Quality

Sciences' international conference, to be held from May 30th to June 1st 2005 at the Weizmann Institute. The conference, which will be attended by world renowned scholars in the environmental field, is an opportunity for Israel to make a contribution to the world by explaining the effects of global environmental pollution as well as solutions that are needed to make the proper corrections. The Youth Forum is one such solution, and we hope to be able to allow as many students as possible to attend and present their projects to this esteemed international audience. In 2004 over seventy-five schools participated in the program; this is over three times the number of classes participating in the first competition. With additional resources we can reach out to more students.

If you wish to make a contribution and have it recognized as a charitable donation for US income tax purposes, the Israel Society for Ecology and Environmental Quality Sciences is a recognized PEF Israel Endowment Fund grantee. Their address is:

P.E.F. Israel Endowment Funds, Inc.
317 Madison Avenue, Suite 607
New York, NY 10017
USA

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Sincerely,

Dr. Richard Laster, Secretary*
Israel Ecology Society