



Touching the Earth, Touching the Heart

Young Israelis of all cultures and religions are discovering a common cause in their commitment to taking action on environmental problems

by **Richard Kool**

SPRING 2003 WAS NOT A TIME that many North Americans considered visiting Israel. Terrorist attacks and bus bombings in the news had left people nervous about the Middle East. But when I received an invitation from Richard Laster and Idit Alhasid of the Israel Society for Ecology and Environmental Quality Sciences to be a judge of student projects for the Touch the World environmental education program, I accepted with enthusiasm. To me, a Diaspora-born Jew and the child of a Holocaust survivor, Israel had been a dream-place, always in my consciousness but never quite real, and here was an opportunity to test my preconceptions. And as an environmental educator, I sensed something particularly unique and hopeful about this exemplary Israeli environmental education program.

I spent two nights on airplanes before landing on the morning of June 9th at Ben Gurion Airport, where I was met by my guides, bundled into a taxi, and taken off to the Givat Ram campus of Hebrew University in Jerusalem. After going through the disquieting procedure of showing my bags

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to young people with machine guns, I turned from the security station to find a hubbub of activity on a covered terrace. Students were excitedly setting up their project displays, conversing intensely, and ready at the drop of a hat to present sophisticated explanations of their work. Nearly 50 schools and 1,000 students from across Israel had participated in the Touch the World program, and the 20 schools with the top projects had been invited to present their findings at this summary celebration at Hebrew University. As I

looked around, I began to see what environmental education might do for this young state. Boys from a Jewish religious school were setting up a display next to that of a group of Bedouin girls, secular Jewish high school students were presenting alongside Christian Arab students,

kibbutz teenagers were presenting next to Muslim boys. Despite the religious tensions that exist in this land, these young people were all in Jerusalem demonstrating their commitment to improving the quality of Israel's environment for all its peoples.

For their projects, the students had been required to develop environmental education programs that would result



Left: Grade 6 girls accompanied by the large puppets they made for a skit on water conservation for younger students. Above: Students from an Arab-Israeli village show off the cardboard compactor they built to reduce the volume of material going into the local landfill.

The Youth Forum for Environmental Education

by **Richard Laster**

The 2002-2003 "Touch the World" project was part of the Youth Forum for Environmental Education, a program designed to promote environmental citizenship among junior and senior high school students in Israel, both Jew and Arab, religious and secular, immigrant and native born. Conducted under the auspices of the Israel Society for Ecology and Environmental Quality Sciences, the Youth Forum invites students to participate in an annual competition in which they create a model for an environmental project. In December, a meeting is held for all the teachers involved, and between December and April supervisors visit the participating schools. In April, there is a preliminary judging of the projects, and those selected are exhibited and judged at the Israel Society for Ecology and Environmental Quality Sciences' annual conference in June. The program is unique in the sense that it allows students to prepare a project and present their ideas to an adult audience, all experts in the environmental field.

Since its inception in 1996, the number of schools participating in the Youth Forum has increased from 18 to 48, and in 2004 we hope to include 75 schools. During the first two years, students competed in designing environmentally sustainable cities. In the ensuing two years, the focus was on environmental entrepreneurship and the design of products that are both environmentally friendly and of economic value. In 2002-03, the focus shifted to environmental education, with junior high and high school students preparing environmental education programs for students in the younger grades. The Youth Forum programs often lead to community outreach. One group of students invited mayoral candidates in their city to present their platforms for environmental protection. Another group designed and distributed refrigerator magnets that educated community members on 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 smaller Arab and Bedouin communities where there is presently very little environmental education.

The participation of students from many different backgrounds brings home the lesson that environmental protection crosses religious and cultural divides. To this end, we have invested heavily in what is often called pluralism. We have religious and secular schools working together, immigrants working alongside native-born Israelis, as well as Arab, Druse and Israeli children working together. Their informal meetings encourage pluralistic thinking, not in the artificially induced atmosphere of a "multicultural" get-together, but rather as a natural spin-off of environmental awareness. Given this country's harsh political reality, the Youth Forum meetings are one of the few opportuni-

ties for young people to meet others who are culturally and ethnically different from themselves in a context that emphasizes their shared humanity. Participation in the Youth Forum is also an excellent opportunity for newcomers to integrate into Israeli society. Studying the local environment through a hands-on project approach is often more effective than classroom learning in helping immigrant students to learn about and appreciate their new homeland.

Some of the best examples of the program's cross-cultural success are the partnerships that have developed between Jewish, Arab and Bedouin schools. 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 arranged meetings, alternating locations, and maintained phone contact throughout the project's gestation. Last year, Levi Eshkol School in Kfar HaYarak (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 who lives in Rahat and studies at Levi Eshkol School initiated a program whereby the students from Levi Eshkol 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 learned about one another's culture and maintained contact even after the project drew to a close.

Participation in the Youth Forum program influenced one group of seventh and eighth graders to such an extent that they recently opened an "Eco-Shop" in their Tel Aviv school where they sell environmentally friendly products. The store operates during breaks between classes and on special occasions after which students and teachers discuss the relative values of environment-friendly items. For example, students know that while they can get a cheaper notebook than the one sold in the Eco-Shop, buying from the Eco-Shop helps the environment because the notebook is made of recycled paper. Thus they are learning 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 Youth Forum creating a trickle-up effect, spreading from students to teachers and parents, families and communities.

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To obtain more information about the Youth Forum, or to submit ideas for student projects, contact Richard Laster at richard@laster.co.il or Idit Al-Hasid at office@newcommunity.info.



The Youth Forum program gives students an opportunity to present their ideas to adults who are experts in the environmental field.

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in meaningful physical outcomes, and to gather data to evaluate the effects of their programs on their target audiences or communities. In many cases, the projects involved the students in teaching others. Although the formats were similar, the variety of projects was astonishing:

- Jewish Grade 8 boys from the Shalom Hartman Institute's religious school in Jerusalem had developed education and communication packages focusing on the biological significance of the tiny "pocket parks" in their neighborhood. Their aim was to educate the community about the importance to migrating birds of even small plots of habitat. The students had worked with groups engaged in bird banding to track the success of migrant songbirds and developed a set of instructions for building nesting boxes.

- To encourage recycling and reuse of paper, Bedouin high school girls had created papier-mâché kits for elementary school students, with instructions in both Hebrew and Arabic. Their papier-mâché objects included tall and graceful urns, delicate and quite beautiful. They had taught papier-mâché in all of the elementary grades, stressing the concepts of reuse and recycling.

- Kibbutz teenagers with learning difficulties had reused old tires and building materials to make a playground for children that included an interactive board to teach about recycling and caring for nature. Their teacher from Kibbutz Alonim, Debby Joyman Asiri, told how the project gave meaning to her students' learning and how important it was to them to be contributing to the education of the younger children that use their facility.

- A group of Christian Arab girls had created an environmental education center in their school and developed a project to raise community awareness of the issue of noise in their environment.

- A group of Grade 8 students had surveyed community members' knowledge of eco-labeling and made an attractive refrigerator magnet to help people understand what they should look for when they purchase products.



Hubbub of excitement as students set up their displays.

ities in Israel, dumps are overflowing and packaging ends up in alleys in unsightly piles that become home for vermin. Students can now pick up cardboard from the streets and alleys and reduce its volume by nearly 40 percent before it goes into the landfill.

Many of the students had used a variety of media to create audio-visual presentations as part of their projects:

- After learning of the problems associated with the capture of wild tropical fish for home aquaria, a group of high school students developed a CD-ROM with information about virtually all saltwater aquarium fish. Their goal was to convince the owners and customers of pet stores to purchase only captive-bred fish. These students hoped to have the National Geographic Society distribute the English-language translation of their CD.

- A class of Grade 6 girls created a skit focusing on water conservation for kindergarten and Grade 1

students, complete with large homemade puppets. The group also designed a sophisticated website that includes games for kids and a quiz on water quality.

- A group of 16-year-old high school girls created a series of short radio spots about waste reduction and recycling, and were asking radio stations to broadcast them. They had tested the radio spots in their school and observed that students changed their patterns of behavior as a result.

- The Habanim School in Lod, an inner-city school attended by many recent immigrants, developed remarkable CD-ROM presentations and short videos about recycling and other environmental activities. Working with their inspired teacher Percy Shmuel, the students developed, storyboarded and filmed the project over the course of a school year. Professional post-production collaboration helped to make the final product extremely effective and entertaining.

- Students from Hava Haklaet, an environmental and agricultural "magnet school" in the Arab-Israeli village of Taybe, had designed and built a cardboard compactor. School principal Gaber Mohsen stood by proudly as they explained that in many small commu-

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I wasn't alone in the judging, of course. The program organizers had engaged the support of a variety of government and institutional collaborators. Bina Bar-on, Vice Director-General of the Ministry of Environment, was a judge, and her Minister was there to see what the students had accomplished. The Ministry of Education had judges from both their teacher inspector service and environmental education department. The past president of the Israel Society for Ecology and Environmental Quality also participated. We were all impressed with the quality and diversity of projects and pleased to recognize student initiatives that are having an impact on schools and communities. But perhaps more important than the impact of their projects on others, a great many of the young people talked about how their projects had changed them. They talked about their interests and dreams. They spoke about learning something important about themselves and their relationship to the world.

I believe that I saw the future of Israel on that morning at Hebrew University. Here were students representing all of their nation's religions and cultures coming together and talking with each other, understanding that everyone, regardless of background, shares the same environment. Environmental education can be a tool for bringing young people together to increase tolerance, understanding and respect. From projects such as Touch the Earth, a new tomorrow can grow.

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