

Annual Report 2008



BACKGROUND

Citizens for the Environment in the Galilee (CFE) is an environmental and social nonprofit organization founded in 1990 by Jews and Arabs residing in the western Galilee. CFE works to protect the environment and natural resources. It aims to investigate and to prevent environmental hazards which harm the ecology and human health, and endanger future generations. CFE has a Jewish-Arab board of directors and co-management team, and has more than 700 Jewish and Arab members, many of whom volunteer.

The Galilee, which is considered to be one of Israel's last remaining green areas, and which provides over 50% of Israel's drinking water, has been intensively developed over the past decades. Due to insufficient enforcement of environmental laws, lack of proper planning, limited citizens' awareness and the inequity of distribution of resources between the Arab and Jewish populations, the Galilee has been adversely affected by major environmental problems. CFE's activities focus primarily on the protection of air and water quality, the preservation of the natural landscape in this region and the facilitation of community involvement and environmental education. We monitor the status of environmental pollution and its impact on the health and well-being of the local population. We then take any necessary action to improve the situation, whether by exposing our findings to the public via the media or pursuing legal and legislative actions.

Past achievements of CFE include:

- Initiated and successfully lobbied for two important new laws, the Environmental Information Law and the Polluter Pays Law;
- Led an uncompromising struggle which eventually succeeded in closing the "factory of death" (Electrochemical Industries/ Frutarom), a major factory which for more than 50 years has polluted the air, the soil and the Mediterranean Sea in the Acco region;
- Researched and published influential reports on the condition of the sewage and the waste in the Galilee;
- Co-founded the Coalition for Public Health. The Coalition works to lower pollution caused mortality rates in the Haifa Bay area and northern Israel; and
- Received of the 2007 *Green Globe Award* and the 1997 Ministry of Environmental Protection's *Shield of Honor*.

PROMOTING ENVIRONMENTAL AWARENESS AND ACTIVISM

Over the past few years Citizens for the Environment in the Galilee (CFE) has channeled many resources to the development and support of local and regional leadership. We are pleased to report that this year we have witnessed a marked change in the level of area residents' participation in social and environmental activism.

The unique initiatives of volunteers within the group brought about a series of educational meetings and classes, covering a myriad of subjects. These included classes

in the Arabic language, a lecture series on the fauna of the High Galilee Mountains, a monthly hiking club, environmental movie screenings followed by discussions, lectures and educational tours.

These activities, besides being excellent learning opportunities, served to build bridges between Jewish, Christian Arabs, Muslim Arab and Druzim by bringing them together and encouraging social interaction. These interactions and new contacts injected lots of new energy and enthusiasm, strengthened ties between different social and cultural groups and stimulating further initiatives and ideas.

This year we initiated, in collaboration with Shatil, a region-wide forum of activists and NGO representatives. The forum empowered environmental activism in many communities in the northern Region. As in previous years, we continued giving lectures in schools, factories and at events.

Our tradition of helping groups and individuals with environmental concerns continued throughout the year. As a result of these requests, we engaged in the following issues:

- The damage to the historical Jewish cemetery in Peki'in,
- Industrial pollution from factories (Teva Phosphates, Osem Galil, Amid David),
- Raw sewage discharges (Hurfeish, Abu Snan, Pekiin Creek),
- Solid Waste issues (Yirka, Pekiin, Mazraa, Evron, Iiblin),
- Protection of public lands and open spaces (Safed, Klil),
- Drinking water supply in local municipalities,
- Elevated cancer rates in Mazraa, and
- Contamination of the Shlomi municipal water reservoir.

FIELD SURVEYS AND SPECIAL INVESTIGATIONS

Data collection and site surveys of environmental hazards continued to be an essential component of our work this year. Most of the data collected was entered into a data-base which will be analyzed and published.

Our field work focused on environmental damages resulting from agricultural practices, raw-sewage discharge from municipalities and army bases and fires in solid waste disposal sites. We have interviewed and worked with factory employees and experts from the Ministry of Health.

PROTECTING WATER SOURCES

This year, one of the driest years on record, brought to the forefront of public awareness the severity of the water crisis in Israel. The Galilee region is one of Israel's principal sources of water, yet it is riddled with pollution sources, some of which are considered irreversible. In past years we were able to finance for our work on water issues through a grant from the Green Environment Fund. Even though we lost our funding for this

project, we feel that we must continue our work on this crucial issue on a miniscule budget.

Kesziv Creek

Since the contamination of the aquifer in 2006, the pumping station in Ein Ziv has been shut down. This is a significant loss to the area's drinking water resources and to the economy in general. The contamination did not come as a surprise to us. This year, as in the past, we continued to work towards conceptual changes in sewer treatment and water pollution prevention. Early in 2008 we witnessed another sewage leak, and the problem is still not resolved.

International Water Day & Earth Day

On International Water Day (March 22) we organized a tour of pollution sources in the Galilee. This was a big success; reporters from Jewish and Arabic newspapers, journals and TV news stations, as well as representatives from the Ministry of Health and the Nature Reserves Authority participated in the event, and then published their findings, resulting in significant media coverage. CFE also participated in a drinking water conference, held at the Tel-Hay university campus during Earth Day.

Water Stoppages in Arabic Municipalities

Resulting from decades of neglect, mismanagement and insufficient budgets, over 50% of Arab towns and villages are at the brink of bankruptcy. One result of this situation is that municipalities are not able to make timely payments for their water to Mekorot, the national water company. In an effort to collect their payments, Mekorot routinely shuts down the water supply to entire towns and villages, forcing the closure of schools and businesses, denying residents of basic hygiene and bringing the quality of life to the level of third-world countries. This year we exposed this problem in the media, and helped bring a shift in public awareness of this issue. We conducted surveys of drinking water and sewage problems in the non-Jewish sector, and exposed the horrifying results in the media and on the floor of the Knesset, during a special session on this matter. Working together with other NGOs, we lobbied Knesset members to pass a law that will allow residents to continue their water service independent of their municipalities' financial difficulties. We expect to continue work on this issue next year.

SOLID WASTE

We continued our ongoing work on illegal garbage dumps, while trying to put an end to the practice of trash burning. Open-air trash burning releases numerous poisonous gases, threatens the health of residents of near-by communities, degrades air quality and adds green house gasses to the atmosphere.

We responded to numerous complaints from residents, and as a result sent legal notices to several municipalities. We identified sites of repeated and frequent burnings, and started

an in-depth investigation as to the causes for this practice. We compiled data from research around the world on the environmental hazards associated with household trash burning, and we are also exploring the economic factors which may contribute to the prevalence of trash burning. We plan to publish our findings in 2009.

INDUSTRIAL POLLUTION

Citizens for the Environment in the Galilee was conceived in response to industrial pollution, and a good portion of our work is still focused on industrial areas. In many cases our investigations of polluting industries have run into a maze of close connections between big money and government, which we find hard to un-tangle. In many industrial areas there is already an un-reversible damage to natural resources, such as underground water and soil. In investigating these polluters, our biggest challenge was always the lack of reliable information on what factories are discharging into the environment, and in what quantities.

We therefore decided that, while we need to keep compiling information on pollution sources, we must also initiate and lobby for specific, enforceable laws. We focused on a Freedom of Environmental Information Law, which will make information on pollution available to the public, and a Polluter Pays Law, which will deny the economic viability from polluting industries. We expect that these laws will change drastically that reality of environmental pollution Israel, and in particular improve the current situation of pollution from Industry. (More information on these laws in the Legislative and Legal Actions section.)

So far, our efforts at gathering information, through freedom of information requests from municipalities, have run into a myriad of problems, and have set back our ability to act.

Survey of Industrial Areas

In 2007 we embarked on a three-year project to gather information on all industrial activity in the northern Region. With this information, we will be able to cooperate with industries and businesses, expose environmental problems, and facilitate the sharing of information on how factories and businesses reduce risk and solve problems.

This year, as in 2007, we focused on the western Galilee, mapping industrial areas and surveying potentially polluting industries. In 2009 the project will focus on analyzing the risk potential of the various industries, with the goal of publishing a biannual report.

Actions Regarding Specific Industrial Polluters

Listed below are four examples of our achievements in fighting polluting factories and industrial complexes.

1. IMC plant, Ziporit

The struggle against opening this aluminum smelting plant started in 2005, on the grounds that it does not comply with the regulations of the industrial area, and it continues to this day. During 2008 we managed to generate interest from local communities, and residents flooded the Planning Commission with hundreds of comments in opposition to the operation of the factory. This public outcry, combined with opposition from environmental organizations, forced the Regional Planning Commission to schedule several days of additional public hearing in October. This was accomplished through cooperation with Adam Teva V'din and the area residents' action committee. The Planning Commission has yet to publish its decision on the matter.

2. Compost Plant, Hosen

The plant was constructed with the help of generous government support, and produces the growing medium for the local mushroom farmers. It has been in operation for many years without a business license and without a building permit, while emitting foul odors. As a result of public outcry and some media coverage, the plant has improved the control of foul smelling emissions, but still operates without a permit from the Ministry of Environmental Protection. In June 2008 we informed the Ministry of our intention to take legal action against the plant, and we are preparing for a lawsuit with help from Adam Teva V'din.

3. Amid Plant, Hosen

This plant is another example of the "Wild Western Galilee" mentality, in which industry is above the law, and the Ministry for Environmental Protection is asleep at the helm. This plant was also built without the needed permits, and operated without any monitoring mechanism. Early in 2009 the Regional Planning Commission considered giving the plant the zoning change and the building permit it is requesting, but we were there and testified against it. The request was denied, but the plant is still operating as usual. Only recently we witnessed the start of criminal persecution against this polluter. We will keep demanding that this plant, and others like it, will be relocated to an industrial area which is equipped to handle proper disposal of chemical pollution.

4. Tefen Industrial Area

CFE co-founded and are active members of the Tefen Industrial Zone Council. This Council serves as forums for area residents, CFE, Ministry of Environmental Protection representatives, managers of the industrial zones and industry representatives, to come together and speak about relevant issues. The team is trying to find solutions to the myriad of environmental problems caused by the daily operation of this Industrial Area in a collaborative and respectful manner.

At the same time we are fighting the pollution of water resources caused by the illegal discharge of sewage from Tefen. As part of this campaign we organized informational tours for reporters and local activists. We continue to expose the problem in the media, and have sent notices of eminent legal action to the Water Authority, the local municipality, and to the Ministry for Environmental Protection.

REGIONAL PLANNING

Ma'alot Expansion

During the last few years, the Mayor of Ma'alot has been pushing for a plan to expand the town by adding a new neighborhood, totaling 2,400 housing units, on the hills just east of the Montfort Pond. The construction of roads and other infrastructure for this expansion will necessitate building within the boundaries of a declared nature reserve. We started our campaign against this plan in 2008, and participated in several preliminary discussions at the Regional Planning Commission, where we tried to win the support of several area leaders. In an effort to alert the public to the problem, we published position papers, organized tours to the site, and gave out leaflets. Currently the plan is up for consideration at the national Planning Commission, no date is set for a hearing.

Protecting Betsset Beach

Betsset creek empties into the Mediterranean just south of the border with Lebanon, and the surrounding beach area is one of the last undisturbed, accessible beaches in Israel. The sand on this beach is made of crushed shell particles, and it is a home to unique plant communities, and an important sea-turtle nesting site. Recently the area was leased to private developers who plan on constructing a vacation retreat, to include tens of thousands of square meters of buildings, and a man-made lake. This plan is based on older zoning plans, currently expired, threatens the natural resources of the area and the public's right to enjoy them.

Citizens for the Environment in the Galilee has joined area residents and other organizations in a campaign to save the beach. We are also trying to force the National Water Company, Mekorot, to stop pumping water from the upper section of the creek. If the water will be captured downstream instead of upstream, the creek could return to a year-round flow, and support a riparian habitat. This may also aid in pushing back the sea-water infiltration into the local aquifer.

Blue Valley

This important area, in the center of the town of Safed, is one of the last green spaces open and accessible to the public. The valley serves as an important recreation area and, and includes a municipal swimming pool and vast lawns. The area was recently sold to a developer and slated for high-density apartment buildings. The implications to the residents are severe: loss of recreational areas, closing of the swimming pool, and taking away the only easily accessible open space from thousands of families, many with young children. During the year we helped the local residents fighting this development with advice and counseling on city planning and legal matters, and will continue this work next year.

Regional and National Forums

This year we continued to be part of rallies, forums, seminars and strategic meetings with other organizations. These included the Coalition for Public Health, Life and Environment (a coalition of environmental organizations in Israel) and the Environmental Justice Forum. We have also joined, for the first time, the Forum of Peace and Environmental Organizations, an initiative of the Van Leer Institute.

FREEDOM OF INFORMATION

Good, timely access to information and data is key to our work. However, many municipalities, government offices and various authorities resent the release of information to the public. This phenomenon stems from unfamiliarity with the law, an attempt to protect industries, and a tradition of hiding mistakes and errors at any cost. The municipalities which refused our requests for information on polluting factories include the three regional councils in the Western Galilee: the Western Galilee Towns Environmental Association (WGTEA), the towns of Karmiel and the town of Ma'alot-Tarshiha. After a prolonged exchange of letters and requests, followed by several meetings with the WGTEA, we resorted to an administrative petition from the regional court in Haifa to direct the WGTEA to release information to us and to the public, regarding the release of pollutants to the environment from factories under their jurisdiction.

While we have to fight to get information, we try and make information easily accessible to the public. One way we share information is through our website, <http://cfe.org.il>. The site is updated frequently, and is used to share information both within the organization and with the public and other organizations. The site contains original articles covering our work and related topics, minutes of public meetings, pictures, and links to other sites. This is the fourth year that our website is in use, and we average 180 visitors per day. Many of our members discover us for the first time through our website, and it is used daily to reach us and request information.

LEGISLATIVE AND LEGAL ACTIONS

Environmental Information Law

Citizens for the Environment in the Galilee initiated and successfully lobbied for this important new environmental law which passed in the Knesset in 2005. This law defines clearly the basic right of citizens to access information in general, and specifically information on substances discharged into the environment. This law is an invaluable tool in our work to stop pollutants, because the lack of information prevented individuals and organizations from even asking the right questions about the presence of pollutants. However, since the passage of the law, the Ministry of Environmental Protection failed to publish specific regulations and define which substances need to be reported, and how often. In order to force the Ministry to move forward on this issue, we had to sue the Ministry in the Supreme Court. Following our legal action against the minister, the

Ministry started the process of writing these regulations, and CFE, together with together with Adam Teva V'din and the legal clinic at the Tel Aviv University, were invited to comment on the draft. The regulations were approved by the Knesset Committee on the Environment in February 2009, which makes the regulations part of the law. The immediate implications are that 18 month from the date of approval, every public office must release any information it has collected or acquired regarding pollution, to the public, through printed copies in its offices or on its website.

Polluter Pays Law

Citizens for the Environment in the Galilee also initiated and successfully lobbied the Polluter Pays Law, which passed on the Knesset floor on July 27, 2008. The purpose of this law is to intensify the punishment and give more “teeth” to existing environmental laws. CFE have initiated the law and lobbied for its passage together with the Coalition Public Health and Megama Yrukah. The law was sponsored by Knesset Members Hanin and Malkior, and passed with a vote of 34-0.

The new law allows for doubling of criminal fines, and allows courts to ask for punitive damages equal to the savings or the profit that a polluter earned by not preventing the pollution. The implication of this is a correlation between the scope of the pollution and the size of the fine.

The law also addresses situations where certain pollution is not preventable with current technologies, and companies receive a pollution permit (within set limitations). In these cases the polluters will have to pay a fee, with the purpose of making pollution expensive and encouraging polluters to find better, cleaner technologies.

Stopping the Development of Industrial Complex Associations

One of the bills we worked to prevent from passing into law this year, by writing a document explaining its detrimental effects on the environment, is a law giving the Ministry of Interior the authority to combine several industrial areas, which are not in geographic proximity to each other, into an Industrial Complex Association. We are worried that this model will be worse than the current model of Industrial Councils, containing all the flaws of the current model and making environmental problems harder to tackle.

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