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Pope welcomes Israeli, Jordanian, Palestinian bird experts

Scientists go to Vatican to share excitement about the cross-border barn-owl project for pest control (and peace) that originated in Israel.

By Abigail Klein Leichman



Pope Francis with Prof. Yossi Leshem of Israel and Gen. Mansour Abu Rashid of Jordan. Photo courtesy of Vatican Media

Israeli, Jordanian, Palestinian and Swiss bird experts recently traveled to the Vatican to discuss their successful cross-border project using barn owls for biological pest control.

The project eliminates the use of toxic pesticides in agriculture and has promoted cooperation among Jewish and Muslim farmers.

"The meeting with Pope Francis was an extraordinary experience," reported Tel Aviv University Prof. Yossi Leshem, the Israeli ornithologist who spearheaded the project in 1983 at Kibbutz Sde Eliyahu, with the first installment of 14 nesting boxes.

"The Pope moved us with the simplicity of his manners, his informal communication, his intelligence, and his tremendous excitement for the protection of biodiversity and his interest in the protection of the Earth, which he characterizes as God's creation and the duty of every believer to protect and save from extinction."

In 2002, Leshem expanded the barn-owl project to farms in nearby Jordan and Palestinian Authority territories. It became a national initiative in 2008 in cooperation with the Society for the Protection of Nature in Israel and the governmental ministries of Agriculture, Environmental Protection and Regional Cooperation.

In 2017, the barn-owl project spread to Cyprus and Greece as part of an official trilateral agreement. Today, approximately 4,500 nesting boxes are installed altogether.

"About 10 years ago, Prof. Alexandre Roulin of Lausanne University in Switzerland, who is a leading figure in the study of barn owls, joined the project," said Leshem.

"In June 2018, we held a remarkable tour in Switzerland in the patronage of the president of the Swiss Confederation, Alain Berset, who invited 150 ambassadors stationed in Switzerland to Richterwil Farm, where nesting boxes are installed for the barn owls.

"The visit presented the project that originated in the Middle East as a model for environmental cooperation that contributes to the peace process in the area."

Joining Leshem and Roulin on the 2018 Swiss tour were Jordanian Gen. Mansour Abu Rashid, chairman of the Amman Center for Peace and Development; and a

Palestinian representative who prefers not to be identified.

During that tour, Roulin spoke with the Vatican ambassador in Switzerland and Bishop Charles Morerod about the possibility of meeting with Pope Francis.

"The Pope is very committed to the protection of the Earth and wrote a book called *Laudato Si* [Praise Be to You] on the subject," Leshem explained.

In April, the four scientists received an official invitation to visit the Vatican on May 11. The meeting went over its scheduled time of 30 minutes, Leshem related, "because of the Pope's high interest in our activity."

While in Italy, the men also met with Italian birders and spoke in the Vatican Plaza before an audience of 1,000 nature lovers and students.

They presented Pope Francis with gifts: a photograph of the Vatican, Moon and Earth taken by Israel's *Beresheet* spacecraft from an altitude of 400 kilometers; Swiss painter Laurent Williger's original painting of a barn owl with an olive branch on the Israel-Jordanian border; a book on barn owls written by Roulin; a segment of the Madaba Map of Jerusalem and the Jordan River; an album of paintings of the Dead Sea; Hebrew, Arabic and English versions of the children's book *Buma the Barn Owl*; and a sculpture of a swift taken from a larger sculpture by Mark Coreth at St. John Eye Hospital in the Old City of Jerusalem.



The Israeli, Jordanian, Palestinian and Swiss ornithologists meeting with Italian birders while in Rome to visit the Pope. Photo: courtesy

The swift is a bird that can be found nesting between the stones of structures sacred to all monotheistic religions: the Vatican in Italy, the Church of the Nativity and Western Wall in Jerusalem, and mosques in Amman, said Leshem.

In addition to discussing barn owls, the delegation also told the Pope about other bird-related projects including research on migratory storks in the region.

Leshem said storks are an example of "birds that unite between all people on the globe."

"At the conclusion of the meeting we asked for the blessing and the support of the Pope in advancing the subject we presented, and to examine its expansion to the rest of the world," said Leshem.

"We asked the Pope to consider hosting a conference in the Vatican of official senior religious figures from the three religions [Christianity, Islam and Judaism], scientists and environmentalists along with world leaders."