

# I Stood at the Lowest Point on Earth



By Jamil Dababat

I have visited the Dead Sea many times, and each time I have stood at the same place and observed that the water is receding. The Dead Sea is shrinking.

This body of water has been “dead” for thousands of years. It acquired its name from its high salt concentration; with a concentration that is ten times higher than in seas and oceans, nothing is able to survive

in it. And there will come the day when the salty expanse of water will literally die and disappear from the face of the earth. But on a calm summer day, the sea waves are gently hitting the salt-coated stones on the shore.

The legendary tale of the Great Rift, with earth plates receding from one another and thus causing the low elevation of this part of our planet, will likely one day come to an end. This has not been officially verified by experts nor can it be imagined by tourists. Anyone who sees the shiny surface of the water would hardly believe that this unique expanse of water could vanish. I have often stood on the seashore, closed my eyes, and visualized the sea that is as old as history. I can hardly take in the idea that it will dry up one day. The disappearance of the Dead Sea would be a disaster, a nightmare come true.

It is indeed exciting to stand at the lowest point on earth and let yourself be absorbed into one of the most significant natural phenomena in the world. Since the beginning of history, the Dead Sea has witnessed and lived through the various civilizations and cultures that have prevailed in the area.

The sun hovers above the horizon, the sea appears like a huge plate covered with water vapor, and tourists climb down wooden steps to get into the water – but none of them realizes that many years ago these steps were submerged in the sea water.

The sea is mentioned in the historic and holy books on Palestine and the Levant, and it appears on maps of the Hellenic, Roman, Byzantine, and Arab Islamic eras. In the Old Testament, the Dead Sea was mentioned as the Salt Sea or the Valley of Sidim (Genesis 14:3). Sources mention that the Nabateans, who arrived in Palestine from the Arab Peninsula around 500 BC, extracted bitumen and tar from the Dead Sea water and exported it to Egypt, where it was used in mummification.

Standing at the lowest part of the world and remembering its rich history





Wadi Qelt. Photo by Imad Atrash.

The areas west of Jericho, the Jordan River, and the Dead Sea were once rich resources of water that provided for the inhabitants in these areas and fed into the Dead Sea. Water came from Wadi Daraja and Wadi Teqoa near Bethlehem, Wadi Qadrun in Jerusalem, and Wadi Qilt, Al-Auja, Fasayel, and Samya springs near Jericho. However, in spite of seasonal floods that still occur in these areas, water has generally become rare. The Israeli authorities have taken control over the water sources and built settlements and military establishments that use the same water resources. Not much water is left for Palestinian use, and the water resources are in danger of drying up. (Courtesy of Palestinian Wildlife Society, PWLS.)

makes you wonder: Is it possible that the Dead Sea will die? Figures issued by experts and international organizations concerned about water activity in the Dead Sea indicate that, indeed, this is a possibility. Its eastern shore is expanding. The Dead Sea water has receded toward the east and the emerging shore has formed a layer of salty residue. Any laborer who works in an Israeli sea resort can notice that the water has been receding year after year. Standing on the calcified muddy shore, a laborer in a sea resort told me that the water has receded since last year. “The water was up there,” he said, pointing to a slightly elevated land.

Fear of the loss of the Dead Sea is not limited to local authorities; it has rather become an international concern. Journalists from all over the world have written about this phenomenon; the issue has been highlighted by politicians

from Palestine, Jordan, and Israel, the three riparian countries that share the beach of the Dead Sea; NASA has recently issued warnings concerning the loss of the Dead Sea, and politicians and decision makers in the State of Palestine are becoming increasingly pessimistic. But no measures have been taken to reverse the trend, and the Dead Sea is continually shrinking.

The seashore that stretches over a few kilometers became desolate after the Israeli authorities surrounded it with barbed wire from the western side. Since 1967, Israel has maintained control over the western shore. We Palestinians are denied access, and the Oslo Accords have failed to safeguard Palestinian rights to the Dead Sea. But Israelis are allowed access to the shore through a meandering dirt path. Jewish sunbathers cover their bodies with mud, and the sun shoots its arrows at

the lowest part of the earth, causing it to shine like crystals made of unique and rare chemical elements. The joy on the faces of Jewish sunbathers contradicts the contortion on the faces of Palestinian decision makers. Palestinians are denied access to the Dead Sea and cannot make any use of it because Israeli authorities forbid any Palestinian activity in the vicinity of the Dead Sea, even though, according to the governor of Jericho, the Oslo Accords granted Palestinians control over 182 km<sup>2</sup> of the Dead Sea. (Its surface was 660 km<sup>2</sup> in 1997, but in 2014, it was reduced to 600 km<sup>2</sup>.)

The permanent loss of the Dead Sea is possible. According to expert Imad al-Atrash, the ratio of incoming to outgoing water is 1 to 3. The Dead Sea has become a main issue for discussion among the three beachfront countries. When the World Bank launched studies

on the Bahrain Canal – a pipeline that is to connect the Red Sea with the Dead Sea, transporting both brackish and fresh water in two different channels – Israel tried to keep the Palestinians out of any discussion even though, according to international law, Palestine is a riparian country.<sup>1</sup>

Environmentalists and economists worldwide are waging war against the pipeline that is planned to bring 2 billion m<sup>3</sup> of water to the area, half of it for desalination and the other half with brackish water to be added to the Dead Sea. Even the study undertaken by the World Bank has been criticized. Objections to the canal range from economic to environmental to indicate that the Dead Sea would dry up at an even faster rate if the canal were built, due to the build-up of gypsum that would result from mixing the sulfate-rich waters of the Red Sea with the



Wadi Qelt. Photo by Imad Atrash.

calcium-rich water of the Dead Sea.<sup>ii</sup> In this case, the Dead Sea may turn white and algae may appear. In all cases, the characteristics of the Dead Sea water will change. The cost is also staggering: numbers cited range to as much as US\$ 4 billion that would have to be raised to complete the project, while the annual running-cost estimates run from US\$ 400 million at this time to US\$ 660 million by 2060. And a planned hydropower plant would not cover the energy needed for desalination or transport of the waters up the Jordan Valley, and the resulting drinking water would be too expensive for the local population to afford.<sup>iii</sup>

During the day, voices of tourists echo in the air, but at night complete silence prevails. The Dead Sea area is restricted at this time. Along the southern road from Jericho to the Dead Sea, the road on which Palestinians are allowed to drive, one can see no sign of Palestinian existence. The collapsed margins of the hills reveal the receding spaces of the sea. Instead, along the seashore there are Israeli plants for the extraction of salt from the Dead Sea for cosmetics and other uses. Israeli manufacturing and exploitation of the Dead Sea water contribute to the recession of the sea. The salt craters that appear on the seashore testify to its water loss.

Every time I visit the Dead Sea I ask myself: Will the sea die or continue to live? One day I stood on top of a hill overlooking the Dead Sea. I watched the sunrise reflecting upon the surface of the sea, and I said to myself, "As long as the light sparkles on the surface, the sea will live."

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<sup>i</sup> Sharon Udasin, "Israel, Jordan advance \$800 million, Red-Dead Canal, water swapping project," *The Jerusalem Post*, January 1, 2015, available at <http://www.jpost.com/Business-and-Innovation/Environment/Israel-Jordan-advance-800m-Red-Dead-canal-water-swapping-project-435984>.

<sup>ii</sup> Greta Link, "Red Sea – Dead Sea Canal and the Feasibility Study of the World Bank," Global Nature Fund, December 2013, available at <https://www.globalnature.org/bausteine.net/f/8005/RedSea-DeadSeaCanalandFeasibilityStudyoftheWorldBank.pdf?fd=2>.

<sup>iii</sup> Ibid.