

# A Place Worth Visiting

## Palestine's "Land of Olives and Vines – Cultural Landscape of Southern Jerusalem, Battir" – World Heritage Site



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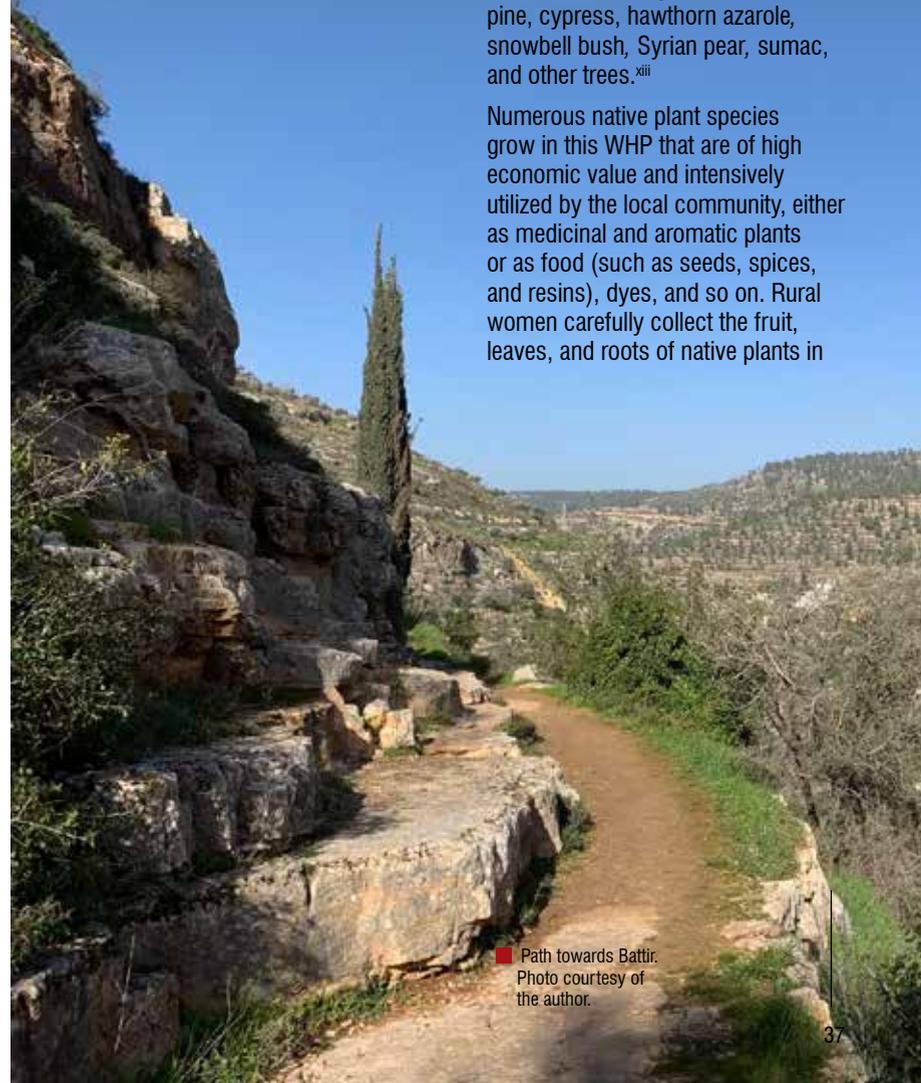
The World Heritage Property (WHP) "Land of Olives and Vines – Cultural Landscape of Southern Jerusalem, Battir" is located in the central West Bank, approximately 7 kilometers southwest of Jerusalem and 6.4 kilometers west of Bethlehem. It is found on the western side of the mountain range that runs parallel to the Mediterranean coast (Map 1).<sup>i</sup> The site is part of a valley system that starts in Beit Jala (at Cremisan Monastery), runs around the village Al-Walaja, progresses through Al-Khader, Battir, Husan, and Nahhaliin, and continues to collect runoff until it reaches a major discharge to the Mediterranean via Wadi Es-Sant, also filling the western water aquifer. The heritage site is very picturesque, with deep valleys, some of which have been terraced for hundreds if not thousands of years and covered by typical Mediterranean vegetation. Excavations in the valley show that humans have used the valley's bounty since the Middle Bronze Age, throughout the Iron Age and the Persian, Hellenistic, and Early Islamic periods, up until today.<sup>ii</sup> Its rich cultural heritage features, among other monuments, Roman tombs and wells and old Palestinian watchtowers, which are presumed to have existed from late prehistory into the early historical periods (the ninth to the fourth millennia BC). Ideally located with fertile lands, natural springs, and rich vegetation cover, the area was built by its inhabitants into a terraced landscape that provided the surrounding communities of Jerusalem and, at a later stage, the Bethlehem governorate with fruits, vegetables, herbs, and, most importantly, olives and olive oil.

The WHP Battir is located in the Mediterranean botanical and zoogeographic region,<sup>iii</sup> the Mediterranean biogeographical zone, and the Mediterranean Forests, Woodland and Scrub biome.<sup>iv</sup> The property is announced as an Important Bird Area (IBA),<sup>v</sup> listed on the Green List of the State of Palestine by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN),<sup>vi</sup> designated as a Key Biodiversity Area<sup>vii</sup> and a Centre of Plant Diversity,<sup>viii</sup> considered one of World Wildlife Fund's Global 200 priority biomes for conservation,<sup>ix</sup> and part of Global Biodiversity Mediterranean Hotspot<sup>x</sup> and the Global Center of Plant Diversity,<sup>xi</sup> all

designations of global conservation importance. Stakeholders and locals value the area for its plants and animals that are of high social, cultural, and economic importance and because it contributes significant ecosystem services<sup>xii</sup> and benefits to local communities. The place is also one of the forested green areas in the southern West Bank region that significantly contributes to biodiversity conservation, the adaptation and mitigation of climate change, and efforts to combat land degradation and desertification in Palestine.

The valley's landscape typically forms a patchwork mosaic where different vegetation types intermingle in complex patterns created by variations in physical, biological, and anthropogenic landscape conditions. Pine and oak ecosystems form contiguous patches within this landscape, in pure stands or as mixed pine–oak ecosystems. The main ecosystem of the natural areas of the property, however, is a *Quercus calliprinos* limestone woodland, dominated by Palestine oak trees along with pistachio, Eastern Strawberry, carob, stone pine, cypress, hawthorn azarole, snowbell bush, Syrian pear, sumac, and other trees.<sup>xiii</sup>

Numerous native plant species grow in this WHP that are of high economic value and intensively utilized by the local community, either as medicinal and aromatic plants or as food (such as seeds, spices, and resins), dyes, and so on. Rural women carefully collect the fruit, leaves, and roots of native plants in



■ Path towards Battir.  
Photo courtesy of  
the author.

their fields or from the nearby forests for use in the family kitchen. The plants used as food include olives, almonds, pears, Solomon's lily, prickly asparagus, white beet, dwarf chicory, rocket, garden purslane, edible mushrooms, and others. The plants used as medicinal and aromatic plants include cat thyme, germander, hedge germander, common sage, horse mint, round-leaved mint, wild thyme, African fleabane, and others. Plants used as seeds include pine, fenugreek, sumac, and others.

The WHP is also famous for the cultivation of local landraces (cultivated crops derived from wild plants) and for preserving their wild relatives. A widespread practice among farmers is to save seed from their crops for the following year's cultivation, such as *cucurbitaceous* seeds that include zucchini, pumpkin, and calabash gourds that are usually hung to dry for the following season

when their seeds are sown or eaten fresh; in some species, their dried skins are used to produce handicrafts and ornaments. Landraces found on the Battir site include wheat, barley, *Battiri* eggplants, *baladi* (literally, country) zucchini, *baladi* green beans, *baladi* cauliflower, *baladi* thyme, and others. Farmers also collect seeds or seedlings from wild relatives, especially wheat, lettuce, pear, green pistachio, barley, fennel, cauliflower, peas, vetch, wild thyme, and others. All of these form a very important germplasm that needs to be preserved, and the practice itself needs to be promoted among local farmers.

The area around Battir furthermore supports the occurrence of a wide range of invertebrates and vertebrates. Among the endangered and threatened mammals, the mountain gazelle and striped hyena have been found inhabiting Al-Makhrour Valley. In addition, the



■ Green frog. Photo courtesy of BU-PIBS.



■ Little owl. Photo courtesy of Anton Khalilieh.



■ Mountain gazelle. Photo courtesy of BU-PIBS.

**The spectacular natural and cultural heritage of this site makes it an indispensable destination for foreign and domestic tourists alike. Since its inscription as a World Heritage Property in 2014, the number of visitors has increased significantly, reaching approximately 250,000 in 2017. Visitors come for various purposes, mainly to hike, relax near the springs and pools, eat at a local restaurant, or conduct research and studies.**

■ Al-Makhrour Valley. Photo courtesy of the author.



amphibians variable green toad, green frog, and the tree frog were found in Battir. Many reptiles live on this site, such as the Mediterranean chameleon, Lebanon lizard, Mediterranean spur-thighed tortoise, and others, such as a number of bats, rodents, land snails, bees, earthworms, butterflies, bugs, scorpions, and spiders.<sup>xiv</sup>

Several kinds of birds have been recorded on this site, including the long-legged buzzard, short-toed eagle, blackbird, Sardinian warbler, spectacled bulbul, great tit, graceful prinia, collared dove, and chukar

■ *Cyclamen persicum*. Photo courtesy of the author.



■ *Cistus salviifolius*. Photo courtesy of the author.





■ Ein Emdan Spring. Photo courtesy of the author.

as breeding species. Some bird species threatened at the national and regional levels were found there, including the long-billed pipit, black-eared wheatear, long-legged buzzard, Cretzschmar's bunting, and little swift.<sup>xv</sup>

In acknowledgement of these significant values and features, the property was inscribed on the World Heritage List in 2014 (Ref. 1492), following an emergency nomination in accordance with

criteria (iv) and (v). The site was immediately placed on the List of World Heritage in Danger, once it was acknowledged that the landscape was threatened by emerging and intensifying sociocultural and geopolitical transformations, citing specifically the start of construction of the Israeli "Wall." To ensure adequate respect for and effectively safeguard the property and its inherent Outstanding Universal Value (OUV), the Palestinian Ministry of

Tourism and Antiquities (MoTA) has composed a Management and Conservation Plan (MCP) in cooperation with the Battir Municipality, UNESCO Ramallah Office, and related stakeholders, based on the guidelines cited in the nomination file. This MCP aims to protect the site's OUV and its physical attributes, provide visitors access in a way that promotes responsible and respectful use of the site, and help enhance the socioeconomic situation of the WHP community. Bethlehem University and the Palestine Institute for Biodiversity and Sustainability, in consultation with Pioneer Consultancy Center for Sustainable Development (PCC) and in collaboration with the MoTA and the Environment Quality Authority, have developed the Biodiversity Conservation Plan (BCP), in response to the MCP, which aims to conserve the ecosystems and biodiversity of the WHP of Bethlehem (Palestine), benefiting the local communities through the sustainable use of the ecosystem services. Both the MCP and BCP have put forward guidelines for a tourism management plan of the site.

The site is an important ecotouristic asset of the area, as it provides beautiful green scenery, clean air, shadow and humidity, soil stability and fertility, and, most importantly, unique recreational opportunities. Further, it offers great potential for environmental, cultural, and historical education, as it is close to Palestinian urban centers and rural villages.

Without the rich ecosystem on this site, however, including its

biodiversity components and the beautiful landscapes and scenery, the whole site would lose its charm and intact structure – not to forget the right of future generations to inherit such biotic richness that continues to afford opportunities to reap the economic, cultural, and spiritual benefits of nature. Hence, it is expected that locals and visitors who wish to enjoy the place and benefit from its resources always act in a manner that ensures the protection, conservation, and sustainability of the place. Visitors must be sure to keep the place clean, refrain from cutting the plants or harming animals or birds, respect the silence of the place, and always remain on the walking paths so as to avoid causing any harm to the site. All relevant parties and stakeholders should collaborate in a spirit of mutual understanding of the significance and values of this beautiful heritage site.

■ Edible Pine. Photo courtesy of Roubina Ghattas.



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<sup>i</sup> "Palestine, Land of Olives and Vines Cultural Landscape of Southern Jerusalem, Battir," World Heritage Site Nomination Document, Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities, Palestine, 2013. The site includes the city of Battir, Al-Makhrour Valley, and the valley that encircles Battir towards Husan Village, encompassing lands of Beit Jala, Battir, and Husan.

<sup>ii</sup> M. Rapoport, "Buried Treasure That's Kept in the Dark," *Haaretz*, December 16, 2006, available at <https://www.haaretz.com/1.4940880>.

<sup>iii</sup> M. Zohary, *Geobotanical Foundations of the Middle East*, Stuttgart: B. Fischer Verlag, 1973, p.739 ff.

<sup>iv</sup> M. Soto-Berelov, P.L. Fall, and S.E. Falconer, "A Revised Map of Plant Geographical Regions of the Southern Levant," Proceedings of the Geospatial Science Research Symposium GSR2, Melbourne, 2012.

<sup>v</sup> "Palestinian Authority Territories," *Birdlife International*, available at <http://datazone.birdlife.org/country/palestinian-authority-territories>.

<sup>vi</sup> "Explore the Green List: Palestine," IUCN, available at <https://iucngreenlist.org/country/palestine/>.

<sup>vii</sup> "KBA Data," Key Biodiversity Areas, available at <http://www.keybiodiversityareas.org/kba-data>.

<sup>viii</sup> S.D. Davis and V. Heywood, *Centres of Plant Diversity: A Guide and Strategy for Their Conservation*, Volume 1, Gland, Switzerland, and Cambridge, UK: WWF and IUCN, 1994, available at <https://portals.iucn.org/library/node/8268>.

<sup>ix</sup> D.M. Olson and E. Dinerstein, "The Global 200: Priority Ecoregions for Global Conservation," *Annals of the Missouri Botanical Garden* 89(2), Spring 2002: 199–224.

<sup>x</sup> See "Biodiversity Hotspots: The Mediterranean Basin," Critical Ecosystems Partnership Fund, available at <https://www.cepf.net/our-work/biodiversity-hotspots/mediterranean-basin>.

<sup>xi</sup> WWF and IUCN, *Centres of Plant Diversity: A Guide and Strategy for Their Conservation, Volume 1: Europe, Africa, South West Asia and the Middle East*, Gland, Switzerland, and Cambridge, UK, WWF and IUCN, 1994.

<sup>xii</sup> Ecosystems can provide services to people who live in proximity, including fertile terraces for agriculture and farming practices; grasslands to graze livestock; water resources such as natural springs for domestic/agricultural use, livestock, and wildlife; forest resources that include mainly medicinal and aromatic plants, native trees for spices, and food; fruit-tree orchards and olive groves; landscapes with scenery, paths, and pools for recreation, especially ecotourism activities; hydrological regulation as part of the natural water harvesting that takes place on site, especially hills and forested areas, helping to replenish the western aquifer; and knowledge creation, education, and heritage values.

<sup>xiii</sup> R. Ghattas et al, "Plant Biodiversity Inventory Report at Al Makhrour Valley 2018/2019," PCC for BU/PIBS, Bethlehem, Palestine, May, 2019.

<sup>xiv</sup> M. Qumsiyeh and E. Handal, "Part 2: Interim Draft Results for Period Ending 30 April 2019," *Biodiversity Conservation and Community Development in Al-Makhrour Valley Project*, BU/PIBS, Bethlehem, Palestine, 2019.

<sup>xv</sup> A. Khalilieh, "Bird Survey at Al-Makhrour Valley and Its Vicinity," Palestine Nature Society for BU/PIBS, Bethlehem, Palestine, 2019.