

Owen Wiese—EcoPeace Intern Reflections 2017

From the time I first learned of EcoPeace, the organization's work intrigued me. For many years, I have been interested in both environmental conservation and Middle Eastern culture. But I often struggled to find the intersection between these seemingly disparate interests, believing that sectarian conflict in the Middle East bore no relation to the "environmental preservation" I had learned about. EcoPeace, however, proved to me that the two topics are not only related, but also intertwined, and in many cases it would be futile to address one issue while ignoring the other. Thus, my time at EcoPeace was everything that I had hoped for—fascinating, informative, and thought provoking.

On my first day with EcoPeace, I got the chance to drive to the SHE Park with Gidon, which both helped frame my experience and allowed me to learn about the organization's history. One of the most fascinating aspects of EcoPeace's work is its interconnectedness with the peace process. Gidon described how the emphasis of the organization has shifted as the peace process has ebbed and flowed—from an environmental organization profiting off the nascent Oslo Accords, to a model for cooperation as the overarching peace process has faltered. Today, as many believe peace is growing further and further out of reach, EcoPeace's involvement seems more important than ever, as it proves there is common interest between parties, and exemplifies the ability of Israelis, Palestinians, and Jordanians to work together.

I have spent much time in Jordan and abroad, yet my experience at EcoPeace nonetheless felt unique. Being in the Jordan River Valley, I was able to see a part of

Jordan that was very different from the westernized King's Academy students and friends in Amman with whom I had previously interacted. Some of my favorite memories are with various employees at the SHE Park, having "conversations" and working through activities, whether it was building a bird-watching hide, eating kanafah, or going for a walk, using my 10 words of Arabic and a handful of sign language. Another favorite memory is of drinking tea and watching the sunset at Nidal's house. As I learned throughout my internship, a significant portion of EcoPeace's work is centered on community engagement, and I certainly feel that I was able to spend time in and around communities in the Jordan River Valley. I appreciate the opportunity to have seen regions of Jordan that I would not otherwise see, and feel truly grateful for how welcoming and generous every person was to Max and me.

There were also certainly cultural differences that permeated my experience as an intern and came with working in a place so far from my home in New York City. As Max and I discussed with Abdel Rahman, there are different expectations for work and varying degrees of industry. There were times when I became frustrated with the relatively slow progress of certain projects such as the bird hide. In my mind, I kept hypothesizing ways the job could be done more efficiently, by having multiple people doing each task at once. But after talking to Abdel Rahman about how EcoPeace first and foremost was a community development organization, the inefficiency I saw became much more understandable. He explained that if he fired people every time they made a mistake, he wouldn't have any employees, but more

importantly, the surrounding community would lack sustainable employment and be filled with animosity towards EcoPeace.

An indisputable highlight of my experience was being able to shadow the group from Columbia University and learn more about their work. The work that the researchers are doing seems to represent an academic complement to EcoPeace's more applied approach. While the work of the University group and that of EcoPeace clearly overlap, they represent different approaches towards a common goal. This was perhaps the most interesting part about their visit—the many conversations I had, and sites I visited alongside the Columbia group allowed me to step back and analyze, on a macro level, the issues that EcoPeace works to solve.

The intersectionality of EcoPeace's work, bridging gaps between environmentalism and peace advocacy, and Israel, Palestine, and Jordan, should become a paradigm. Coming away from the experience, I have thought to address issues such as poverty, or the environment, or conflict not as isolated cases but opportunities to improve and form a cohesive ecosystem. In addition to my takeaways from the organization, my personal experience working with EcoPeace staff was exceptional. I was overwhelmed with kindness, hospitality, and interesting conversations with everyone at the organization. I truly look forward to remaining involved with EcoPeace and hope to find more ways to contribute to their work.