

Open letter to fellow environmentalistsⁱ

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The environmental movement is one of the most successful social movements in the 21st century. In the past 50 years, environmental concerns have moved from the marginal fringes to the mainstream of social policy in most countries throughout the world, and increasingly integrated environmental concerns with the values of human rights and social justice. For most of that time, the movement has played a significant role in my own life. It is therefore tragic for me to see an organisation claiming to be environmental when in fact, behind the environmental facade is ethnic cleansing, colonial occupation and complicity in racist massacres. This open letter is to warn my fellow environmentalists of the real purposes behind the greenwash of the Jewish National Fund (JNF).

I discovered the truth about the JNF during a visit to Israel and the West Bank in 2010, as an 'environmental' member of a study tour of the JNF. I saw the legacy of this "ecological agency" which has consultancy status at the United Nations as an environmental NGO and is registered for charitable or tax benefit status in many countries. We saw destroyed villages and bulldozed houses barely covered up with newly planted forest; fashionable communities built and inhabited by Arabs who are now forbidden from returning; refugees denied even the right to visit the desecrated rubble which was the graves of their parents.

Since its establishment, in 1901, by the World Zionist Organization, the Jewish National Fund (JNF) claims to have "evolved into a global environmental leader by planting 250 million trees, building over 210 reservoirs and dams, developing over 250,000 acres of land, creating more than 1,000 parks, providing the infrastructure for over 1,000 communities, bringing life to the Negev Desert and educating students around the world about Israel and the environment."ⁱⁱ The JNF owns and manages land, plants trees, creates reservoirs and landscape features, and establishes parks for the Zionist purpose of colonising Palestine, ethnic cleansing and enforcing apartheid: the dispossession of land from Palestinian people for the sole use of Jewish colonisers. According to a JNF fundraising pamphlet aimed at British Jews in 1944, the organisation spent its money "afforesting tracts not otherwise suitable for cultivation, thus paving the way for permanent (Jewish) occupation."ⁱⁱⁱ

We visited the Jewish village of Ein Hod on the western slopes of Mount Carmel, fashionable with artists and at the time just recovering from the wild fires which had damaged the surrounding forests. Up until the end of the British Mandate of Palestine, this village was called Ayn Hawd. In May 1948, Zionist militias were ordered to "attack and cleanse" Ayn Hawd and other Palestinian villages between Tel Aviv and Haifa. The village resisted but succumbed in July that year and its residents forcibly expelled. The buildings were retained and the village renamed Ein Hod and occupied by Jewish artists from Europe.^{iv}

What followed has become known to Palestinians as the Nakba, or catastrophe, when hundreds of Palestinian villages were forcibly depopulated and most destroyed and three quarters of a million forced into exile. Some of the intelligence which facilitated this mass expulsion was provided by the 'village files', information gathered by a division of the JNF. The newly established Israeli state allowed for the land of these empty and demolished villages to be transferred from the military to the JNF to act as 'custodian', and the JNF planted forests and established parks in order to prevent the refugees' return.

One such area that we visited is 'British Park,' in the Hebron Hills, in the centre of which is a scattered pile of rubble, the remains of the village of Ajar. Prior to 1948 the village was home to 3730 people who were expelled in October 1948, and the military-occupied land subsequently made available to the JNF. Later, in the West Bank refugee camp of Aida, we met an old lady who told us how she, as a young mother, had fled at gunpoint with her young children. She has not been able to return for 60 years.

We also visited 'Canada Park', a wooded parkland popular with walkers and mountain bikers. This park was

established after the West Bank villages of Imwas, Yalo and Bayt Nuba were evacuated and destroyed when the Israeli army illegally annexed the land in 1967, and then transferred it to the JNF to plant trees over the rubble of homes, shops, cafés, mosques and church. The refugees in nearby Ramallah are separated from their former homes by Israel's wall of concrete and razor wire.

And finally when we visited the Bedouin village of Al Araqib in the Negev desert, it consisted of piles of twisted construction materials on top of children's toys, kitchen utensils and furniture, destroyed only six months previously to make way for the JNF's Ambassadors Forest.

Planting trees with the objective of an ever-expanding, ethnically pure Israel: this is the so-called 'environmentalism' of the JNF.

The JNF's forests have more to do with exploitation than environmentalism. Since its early days, trees were planted to reclaim land, create boundaries and absorb excess immigrant labour from Europe. Its pine forests recreated the European landscape familiar to the colonisers, separating it from the Middle Eastern environment. Its favoured tree is the Aleppo pine (*Pinus halepensis*), renamed 'Jerusalem pine', which never formed more than sparse stands naturally in Palestine, and is ecologically ill suited to the JNF's dense plantations. In the desert the species of choice are the fast-growing, water guzzling, Australian *Eucalyptus*. In 1965 the JNF drained the Hula swamp, destroying a unique wetland and, according to an IUCN/WWF/Plantlife report, causing the extinction of five plant species^v.

Moreover, tree planting proved to have powerful symbolic value for the organisation's propaganda and fundraising purposes with the international Jewish diaspora^{vi}. The JNF's 'environmentalism' must be seen as nothing more than an adaptation of this propaganda aimed at environmentalists.

Principle 23 of the Rio Declaration on the Environment and Development declares: "The environment and natural resources of people under oppression, domination and occupation shall be protected." The JNF betrays this principle and is no ally of environmentalists. Friends of the Earth Palestine makes clear that "the JNF is an organisation with explicitly racist aims of conquest. We call upon all those committed to environmental justice to cease and refrain from working with the Jewish National Fund".

Yet the JNF continues to promote its 'environmental' credentials at global summits and international conferences. It attended the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg, and has been a regular participant at the annual Climate Change Conferences of Parties.

It is time the world's environmental movement exposed the JNF for what it is. Environmental groups, organisations and networks are invited to make a public commitment to denounce the JNF:

- ⇒ Support the international call from Palestinian civil society to *Stop the JNF* : www.stopthejnf.org;
- ⇒ Denounce the JNF as alien to the environmental movement;
- ⇒ Recognize the JNF's sole objective of colonialism and ethnic cleansing and expose the JNF's complicity in war crimes;
- ⇒ Raise awareness of the JNF's real purpose and activities among environmentalists, including members, supporters and activists of environmental organisations and networks^{vii};
- ⇒ Isolate the JNF and distance environmental organizations from the JNF, exclude the JNF from all environmental networks and associations and remove formal JNF representation from campaigns and activities;
- ⇒ Boycott any meetings hosted by the JNF at conferences or international events;
- ⇒ Support the campaign to have the JNF excluded from the Rio+20 Earth Summit this year;
- ⇒ Support the national efforts to remove charitable and tax exempt status of the JNF;
- ⇒ Promote the [Plant-a-Tree in Palestine](#) campaign for meaningful ecological restoration in Palestine.

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ⁱ This open letter is derived from Scandrett, E. 2011 'Open Letter to the Environmental Movement' in Benjamin, J., Levy, M.B., Kershner, S. & Sahibzada, M. (eds) *Greenwashing Apartheid: The Jewish National Fund's Environmental Cover Up* JNF eBook (Volume 4, May 15, 2011) International Jewish Anti-Zionist Network. For the full range of Stop the JNF ebooks and other resources see http://www.stopthejnf.org/resources_recommendedbooks.html

ⁱⁱ <http://www.jnf.org/about-jnf/>.

ⁱⁱⁱ *JNF in action* 1944 pamphlet, London, UK: Jewish National Fund

^{iv} Ilan Pappé 2006 *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine* Oxford: Oneworld. p. 132

^v Radford, E.A., Catullo, G. and Montmollin, B. de. (eds.) 2011. Important Plant Areas of the south and east Mediterranean region: priority sites for conservation. IUCN, Gland, Switzerland and Malaga, Spain. Gland, Switzerland and Malaga, Spain: IUCN. VIII + 108 pp.

^{vi} Yoram Bar-Gal 2003 *Propaganda and Zionist Education: the Jewish National Fund 1924-1947* New York: University of Rochester press.

^{vii} Contact environment@stopthejnf.org for requests for materials.