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How barn owls are helping to bring peace to the Middle East

Conservation project that brought together Israelis and Palestinians is attracting interest from the Chinese military, with suggestions a similar scheme could be tried in North and South Korea

Ian Johnston | @montaukian | Wednesday 22 March 2017 16:05 GMT | 15 comments



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A Jordanian farmer holds a barn owl as a Jewish Israeli farmer, in the blue top, examines a nest box
Hagai Aharon

For some in the Middle East, the sight of a barn owl has traditionally been regarded as a bad omen.

But, amid the seemingly endless failed attempts to bring peace to the region, the bird has been transformed into a symbol of hope that the bitter hatreds between different peoples can be overcome.

Talk of “a miracle” is not being ruled out with the extraordinary peace-building effect of a conservation project attracting interest from the Israeli, Jordanian, Swiss and Chinese militaries. There are also suggestions something similar could be tried to help heal the divide between North and South Korea.

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It began 30 years ago as a modest scheme to help a barn owl population, near Beit She'an in the Hula Valley in Israel, that had been ravaged by poison used by farmers to control rodents. The barn owls would eat the poisoned bodies, then succumb themselves.

The area was near the border with Jordan and the Occupied Palestinian Territories and, with the birds not observing international boundaries, it was logical to involve people living there too.

Some 100 Israeli Jews, Jordanians, Palestinians and Israeli Arabs, who might otherwise have had little contact, began to collaborate to help the barn owls. Slowly, they found they became friends.



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The ecologists behind the conservation project have now written an academic paper about its extraordinary side-effect, called *Nature knows no boundaries: The role of nature conservation in peacebuilding*, in the journal *Trends in Ecology and Evolution*.

One of the researchers Professor Alexandre Roulin, of Lausanne University in Switzerland, told *The Independent*: “Initially we started this project for the barn owls. This was not for peace-building or reconciliation. The idea was to solve an ecological problem.

“What we realised is once we met with all these people ... we realised, wow, these people really become friends.

“When you have an issue people have to solve, nothing to do with religion, tradition or culture, people really agree to be together.

“For us this is a message of hope. They love each other, they are friends.

“This is what we really need because we are stuck, we are always talking about the same issues and there’s no clear solution.”

He admitted the idea of helping to bring peace to the Middle East with barn owls “initially might sound a bit of a strange idea”.

“But when we started to talk to people really directly involved in international relations, they really loved this idea and said we should really be building something with this,” he said.

“For them, this is a platform they can use to start something. I was really surprised to see how convinced they are.”

Remembering the Israel-Gaza conflict



He said he had been invited to give a talk about the project to the Swiss Army and an officer, clearly impressed, had subsequently mentioned it to counterparts in the Chinese military.

The Chinese officers also expressed interest, particularly in relation to defusing tensions on the Korean peninsula.

“It would be really great to start something with North and South Korea,” Professor Roulin said.

“You see, this is something that inspires people and they really believe this is something to go much further.”

He said the project to save the barn owls had essentially given Palestinians, Jordanians, Israeli Arabs and Israel Jews a common cause, “something which everybody is concerned about”.

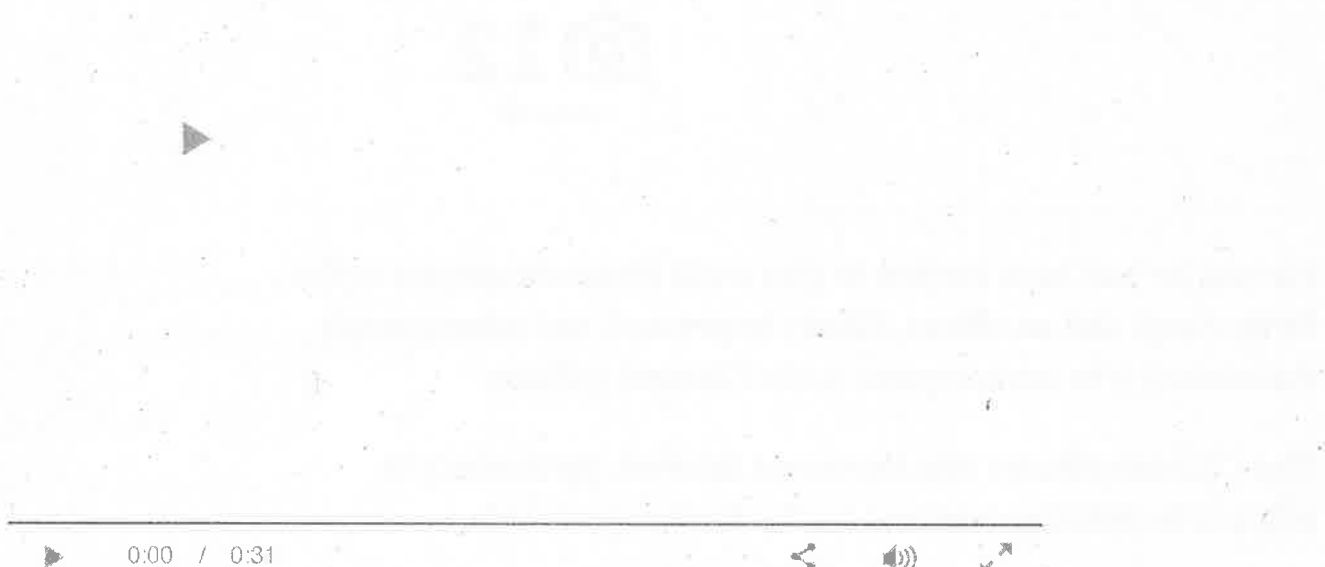
They studiously avoid talking about the conflict itself.

“We never talk about politics. This is something so sensitive, so emotive, that’s why we have this approach. Everything is very sensitive in the region. My God, wow,” Professor Roulin said.

“Actually, I experienced this once, when we started to talk about the conflict. This starts to become a nightmare.”

Asked if he thought Middle East peace would ever be achieved, he said: “What we need is a miracle, really, really, that’s what I think.

“The more I go, the more I believe we need a miracle, something which is unexpected, because this is so predictable what is going on. People always coming up with initiatives and blah, blah, blah.



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“I think this is like in India – Gandhi – we need something really special, a miracle, because it is so complex.”

And asked if the barn owls could be that miracle, Professor Roulin said: “I don’t know, no idea. A miracle is something we

cannot produce.

“This is just a seed. We should put water on the seed. I don’t know if this will be a tree or a small grass, but I have to behave as if I think it will become a tree.”

The paper was written with other academics but also Baruch Spiegel, a former general in the Israeli Army, and Mansour Abu Rashid, Jordan’s former chief of intelligence, now of the Amman Centre for Peace and Development. Forty-four years ago, they would have been on the opposite sides of the October War.

“The biodiversity crisis is one of the biggest challenges that humanity is currently facing. Restoring ecological integrity is essential to maintain a sustainable income deriving from ecosystem services something that can bring communities in conflict to cooperate,” the paper said.

“Here, we show how we succeed in bringing people from Israel, Jordan and the Palestinian Authority to the same table to solve environmental problems.

“Conservation efforts, through environmentally friendly agricultural practices and ecotourism, can prove beneficial for all communities and create opportunities for a constructive dialogue across divides in conflict zones.

“Conservation and peace-building can thus fruitfully feed each other, a vision that should stimulate decision makers to integrate nature conservation into peace-building interventions and scientists to integrate societal issues into conservation projects.”



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As for the barn owls and the farmers, they have also learned to co-exist more happily – at the expense of the rodents.

While the farmers stopped poisoning them, numbers of their natural predators, the barn owls, were boosted by a nest box building programme and other measures.

Each barn owl pair can produce 11 offspring, which can eat up to 6,000 rodents a year “making them an efficient alternative to pesticides for the farmers”. Crop production was unaffected by the switch from pesticides to barn owl-led pest control.

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regular meetings, even during periods of conflict. Documents are written in Hebrew and Arabic.

“This is a highly symbolic undertaking and we successfully convinced the Israeli and Jordanian armies, that were previously fighting against each other, to promote nature protection,” the paper said.

“An example of co-operation following the Israel-Jordan Peace Treaty is the preservation of many bunkers abandoned along the border, which provide a suitable habitat for 12 species of bats, some rare and endangered.

“Today, the Israeli and Jordanian armies are working hand-in-

hand to conserve the bats by adding bat-gripping areas to the ceilings.”

Could abandoned bunkers turned into bat roosts be a modern equivalent of swords beaten into ploughshares?

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