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LOCAL NEWS

1,000 trees planted in Chouf reserve for World Animals Day

NGO says more must be done to protect wildlife

By Patrick Galey

Daily Star staff

Monday, October 04, 2010

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BEIRUT: A leading animal rights groups gathered activists from across the country on Sunday to plant 1,000 trees as part of Lebanon's celebrations of World Animals Day (WAD).

Animals Lebanon coordinated the ceremony in a bid to highlight the plight of forests which once teemed with wildlife.

"Conflict, urbanization and unregulated hunting have all contributed to our local wildlife being decimated," said Lana al-Khalil, Animals Lebanon president and the Lebanese Ambassador for WAD since 2008.

"We all need to do far more to protect our wildlife and the habitats that sustain them. Bears, hyenas and jackals should not be ending up in unregulated zoos, pet shops or personal animal collections."

Present at the ceremony was a representative of Environment Minister Mohammad Rahhal and Nora Jumblatt, a seasoned animal rights campaigner and the wife of Progressive Socialist Party Leader Walid Jumblatt.

"The International World Animal Day and the efforts of Animals Lebanon fall within the successive campaigns sponsored by the Ministry of Environment to preserve biological diversity in Lebanon," Rahhal wrote in his Sunday speech. "The preservation of living organisms is essential to human life."

Lebanese fauna has been in decline for decades, largely owing to poor regulation of hunting licenses: many exotic species are popular sport for hunting enthusiasts.

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The 1,000 trees were planted in the Chouf Cedar Nature Reserve, a specially protected area of land, guaranteeing the safety and security of all wildlife within it.

The reserve is the largest of its kind in Lebanon, comprising some 5 percent of the country's surface area and housing at least 32 species of mammals.

Khaled Sleem, coordinator of the American University of Beirut's Ibsar program, asked those gathered to take the opportunity presented by WAD to consider the necessity of preserving Lebanon's once-blooming forests.

"People depend on nature for ecological services and livelihoods and the loss of biodiversity equates to a deterioration of the livelihoods of countless societies as well as the quality of life for everyone," he said.

WAD was started in 1931 as a way of highlighting the plight of global endangered species. It later came to encompass all animals, wild or domesticated.

Animals Lebanon has recently finalized its draft law seeking to illegalize mistreatment of animals and is set to submit the legislation to the Agriculture Ministry. Currently, abusing animals carries only a paltry financial penalty, owing to outdated welfare laws.

Khalil said that legislation was the next necessary step toward safeguarding animal rights in the country.

"It's very important because as an organization we go about our days trying to rescue animals and some are local wildlife," she told The Daily Star. "You can do this rescuing but there is no long term legislation so there is no resolving the problem.

"If these laws are passed it's a deal to be able to protect animals. In this way, animal abuse would not just be immoral, it would also be illegal. We do feel that Lebanon can be a regional leader in animal welfare," she added.

However Khalil feels civil society still has a vital role to play when it came to maintaining higher standards of animal treatment all year round.

"It's one day during the year to pay tribute to the animals, but that's why there are organizations in Lebanon to pick up the cause for the other 364 days," she said.

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