

**PALESTINIAN AND ISRAELI ENVIRONMENTAL NARRATIVES
DECEMBER 5 – 8, 2004, YORK UNIVERSITY, TORONTO**

This conference emerges out of a continuing effort to promote regional environmental cooperation between Palestinians and Israelis - the Middle East Environmental Futures (MEEF) project. The MEEF project has the central objective of strengthening environmental policy decision-making in Israel and Palestine by integrating environmental assessment with a social science approach to how environmental issues are perceived and what people think the Middle East environment should look like in the future.

THE REASON FOR A FOCUS ON NARRATIVES

Previous work, scholarly and practical, on the environment in Israel, the West Bank and Gaza has emphasized immediate, practical issues. There has been, and continues to be, value in this approach, but it is limited. Discussions of health effects of pollution or water scarcity may treat these problems as specific issues to be addressed with specific solutions. In contrast, ecologists and social scientists look at the interdependence of environmental issues. Ecologists emphasize the ways in which various issues are connected in natural systems. Social scientists emphasize that we interconnect complex information through the framework we use to think about it. The framework we use guides what we pay attention to and how we fit together the information we have.

Much recent social science has explored narratives as frameworks through which we understand our experiences. Groups have shared narratives which explain how the past has led to the present and what choices there are for the future. These narratives are of fundamental importance to groups as they try to identify strategies that will achieve their goals for the future. Environmental narratives direct attention to specific kinds of environmental issues in the present, explain their development out of the past, and offer strategies for action to attain a desirable future. They are fundamental to understanding environmental politics, planning and policy making.

It is not surprising, given the often divergent understandings of their conflict among Palestinians and Israelis, that there would be different understandings of the regional ecology, its past and policies appropriate for its future. Nor is it surprising that each group is not monolithic. Within each group there are multiple narratives, sometimes in conflict with each other, and with different relationships to the narratives of the other group. Different understandings of environmental issues emerge out of local community experience and as Palestinians and Israelis choose among the variety of narrative frameworks which are used in environmental discourse.

The project's focus on environmental narratives has practical implications. If members of a diverse group of environmental researchers do not acknowledge the differing narratives which shape their understandings of their work, cooperative work will be difficult. Self-consciousness about narrative frameworks for understanding the regional environment contributes to joint research which is effective, legitimate in both communities and the basis for long term coordinated policy. Highlighting the range of narratives frameworks used to understand the regional environment makes it possible to discuss how to work towards a common narrative framework.

THEMATIC ISSUES FOR PAPER PRESENTATIONS

- The Environment and National Narratives
- Framing Environmental Issues in Narratives of Conflict and Peacebuilding
- Local Community Narratives
- The Development of Narratives of Sustainability in the Region

PLANNING MEETINGS ON JOINT RESEARCH AND NEXT STEPS

The MEEF project has developed two proposals for policy-relevant research. Small group meetings of conference participants will review and develop these proposals. These sessions will be an opportunity to bring participants new to the MEEF network up to date and to continue our group's work towards joint projects which can foster environmental cooperation.

CONSULTATION WITH INVITED MEMBERS OF CANADIAN CIVIL SERVICE, SCHOLARS AND CIVIL SOCIETY GROUPS

Members of the Canadian civil service who work on Middle East issues, Canadian scholars with an interest in Middle East policy and civil society groups (NGOs and foundations) active in the Middle East will be invited to register for the conference. An orientation session will give them background to the MEEF agenda. Their presence will raise the profile of the MEEF project in Canada and lay the foundation for possible greater Canadian participation in the proposed joint research and for consideration of environmental issues in governmental and civil society links with the Middle East.

For further information contact [Prof. Stuart Schoenfeld](#).