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# Green politics in the developing world: often conflicted and increasingly practical

*By* **Alex Dziadosz**
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CAIRO: There's a legend here that the 19th century sovereign Mohamed Ali, in his fervor to modernize the Egyptian economy, tried to pluck stones from the Pyramids to build dams in the Nile Delta. Luckily for the tourism industry, one advisor was sharp enough to dissuade him, and the last Ancient Wonder of the world stayed intact.

In today's Egypt, some environmentalists see themselves in a similar spot.

Faced with the problem of working in a country where at least one in five live on under $2 per day and conserving the environment often conflicts with raising standards of living, many have turned to pragmatic methods, whether they are trying to save coral reefs, shield wild ibex or halt a factory's construction.

"What's happening now is exactly what happened with Mohamed Ali Pasha," said Amr Ali, managing director of the Hurghada Environmental Protection and Conservation Association (HEPCA). "We tried the environmental debate. That's why I'm talking about money now."

"Environmental issues are new to Egypt," said Minhem Saeed, an economist at the Al-Ahram Center for Political and Strategic Studies.

He sketched a picture of a country pressured by a trio of forces: traditional

agriculture, tourism and industrialization. “With each one of these powers, you will have different types of interests,” he said.

He pointed to a recent movement against an Agrium factory in Damietta. “They [the citizens] are not standing still and taking it,” he said. Opposition has used the environment to argue against the factory, but personal interests still come into play, Saeed said.

“My hunch is there are some interests involved with the people who own land there,” he said. The value of many people’s land would likely sink if a factory were built.

It has been over two centuries since Adam Smith wrote in “The Wealth of Nations” that, “it is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest.” The truth of this has been apparent for many environmentalists: SUVs spew carbon monoxide until oil becomes too pricey; rainforests are mowed in favor of cornfields as ethanol supplants oil.

In countries like Egypt, where the bottom line is often on economic growth and job creation, environmentalists rarely enjoy the mentality that fuels citizen-funded green building projects and makes Whole Foods groceries lucrative.

“People are busy with life,” said Saeed. “Or they just need the jobs.”

For instance, climate change is rarely discussed. “That’s just seen on the Discovery Channel,” said Saeed. “It’s something for much more developed countries, not for Egypt.”

Through his years at HEPCA, Ali has garnered a reputation as something of a firebrand, liberal in his derision of what he sees as senseless or self-motivated attitudes to the environment.

His zeal, which he said he developed at his previous job as a diving instructor, seems to have paid off. HEPCA has swelled to an LE 12-14 million operation, with projects financed by multinational corporations like Coca-Cola and Vodafone. He deals with state bodies like the National Conservation Sector at the Ministry of Environment and the Ministry of Tourism.



While Ali said the group has never really strayed from its green ethos, he has learned the best way to get things done is to sell his projects in the way nearly any business would, as ways to make or save money. “You have to convince them with figures,” he said. ”Otherwise you’re wasting your time.”

For nine years, HEPCA fought development along the Red Sea coastline through a guerilla assault of legal and media tactics, he said. “Now we’re not telling the government to stop the development,” he said. “We’re 100 percent pro-development.”

The state is trying to slice 360 kilometers of coastline into “mega” plots, he said. “Instead of destroying 360 kilometers of coastline, why don’t you concentrate your development?”

He said this would require three developments the size of El Gouna, which he described as a better model, small communities that offer tourists an array of services like entertainment and restaurants.

“If you’re building development without a community behind it, it looks like a touristic concentration camp,” he said. “You put the tourist in, there is no way out, there is nothing to do.”

He has also turned his sights to fish along the Red Sea coast. “It is extremely stupid to deplete the fish stock which brings in Egypt billions and billions of dollars every year because of tourism,” he said. He estimates that at the Brothers Island, one shark can net Egypt an average $120,000 per year from tourists who come to spot them, a sliver of what boats get to fish them.

“When you do the comparison, it is pathetic,” he said. “It is criminal insanity.”

In some cases, activists have turned to methods that they might instinctively oppose, like hunting.

Eco-tourism is just one “politically correct” example of conservation, said John Salevurakis, a professor of economics at the American University in Cairo. “A non-politically correct example would be the safari industries that exist in Zimbabwe, Zambia, Mozambique, South Africa, all the way north to Sudan.”

Best regional example is found in northern Sudan, he said, where a rare subspecies of wild goat live. The goat dwells on both sides of the Sudanese-Egyptian border, but can be hunted legally in Sudan.

Salevurakis said that safari guides are often drawn from those who were poaching the goats for food. According to current figures, a guide is paid $1,500 for a seven-day tour, while the government earns about $5,000 from hunting permits and other fees.

“Now, if I’m paid, as someone living in Sudan, $1,500 for seven days to take some crazy American out to chase some crazy wild goat, am I going to kill them for meat?” Salevurakis said. “Of course not. I’d have to be crazy.”

In Egypt, animals are most at risk in Western Desert, Sinai, and in the southeastern regions along the Red Sea, where species like gazelles and ibex “die in droves,” Salevurakis said. “You want to see something interesting? Just go to the Khan El-Khalili, just look in the shops and look at the ibex horns for sale. For $20 or $30 you buy an ibex horn that’s been transformed into a sword scabbard.”

The poacher likely made no more than half this, he said, so it should take only a fraction of the price of a safari tour to dissuade him. In such a case, locals’ incentives are bent toward preserving the animal, which has become a major source of income.

“You’re basically bribing people,” Salevurakis said. “That’s what economics is all about.”

So why doesn’t the cadre of African countries trying these policies include Egypt? “Because it’s easy and it’s quick and it makes good PR,” said Salevurakis. “It’s easy to say, ‘we have this beautiful protectorate, and

no one can destroy so much as a flower.' But if the destruction of a single flower enables 20 other flowers to grow, then I don't know how you can not call that conservation."

Saeed said Egypt remains conflicted, often between industry and the environment. "We cannot forever try to get it both ways," he said. "As time goes by we will have to make a choice."

For environmentalists, the task remains convincing those in power that the two do not necessarily conflict, that growth and conservation are not so distinct.

"Every place has its own natural resources. When you drain these natural resources completely and shoot yourself in the foot, it doesn't make any sense," Ali said. "It's like going to Switzerland for the mountains. If you're not going to ski, why are you there?"



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