

Militant environmentalism

The army has inadvertently saved the sandy areas between Rishon Letzion and Ashdod. That may end soon

By **Zafir Rinat**

Between the Superland amusement park and the shopping malls of western Rishon Letzion, and the popular Mediterranean beach, is a small gate. The sign on it welcomes visitors to the "Mitvach 24" army base, which is actually a weapons testing ground for the army.

If you choose to accept the "invitation" and enter, you will discover that the testing ground is an entirely different world, a remnant of the days before property development in the area virtually exploded.

Until you reach that gate, you are in the midst of a thrumming zone of roads and housing. Pass through the gate and you will see sand and a range of gravelly hills. They seem detached in time.

Other areas controlled by the defense establishment south of that testing range, also near the coast, look much the same, such as the paratroopers training zone in Palmachim, just south of Rishon Letzion.

Geographically, the area between Rishon Letzion and Ashdod should have been the natural extension of "Gush Dan" – the greater Tel Aviv area. Vast swathes of land remain fallow, unexploited for the construction central Israel sorely needs, and one would have thought it natural to build there. But a recently completed survey by the Open Landscape Institute

(OLI, known by its Hebrew acronym Deshe – Dmuta Shel Eretz), an arm of the Society for the Protection of Nature in Israel, found that

the army got there first. Thus these sandy lands were spared the bulldozer of urban development.

But the future of these areas remains in doubt. Plans are being made to develop infrastructure and housing, and worse – the area, which could have been turned into a nature preserve, is not only neglected, it's becoming hazardous as well.

Dotted around this empty land are impromptu dumps of construction waste. Some of the former dunes have turned into craters, a result of builders stealing sand to make cement. The Soreq creek passes through the heart of this land: it's an open sewer.

Paradise for small rodents and big thieves

The OLI Palmachim Coast Survey was conducted by Dr. Adiv Gal, Uri Ramon and Hava Lahav. The team analyzed the natural resources, the landscape and the human heritage in the stretch of land between Rishon Letzi-

on and Ashdod, between the coastal highway and the coast. No less than 70% of the area covered by the survey – a total of 50,000 dunams – are a closed military zone, whether serving to house army bases, to test weapons or to train soldiers.

swathes of sand and some gravelly hills. About 95% of that beautiful beach is closed to the general public for a variety of reasons, the main one being military use. Some of the little remaining beachfront is only accessible for pay, and then there's a small area by Kibbutz Palmachim.

Some 84% of the area examined by the survey received the highest ratings for landscape and nature. Despite the damage the land has already suffered, it is home to a rich range of flora and fauna undisturbed by construction or roads. In ecological and zoological terms, it's a paradise for animals that have adapted to the arduous conditions of living in sand.

However, it has also become a paradise for another form of sand lover.

Developers may have decided against construction because of the military presence, but the wide open spaces have also invited two types of environmental criminals: Dumpers of construction waste and sand thieves.

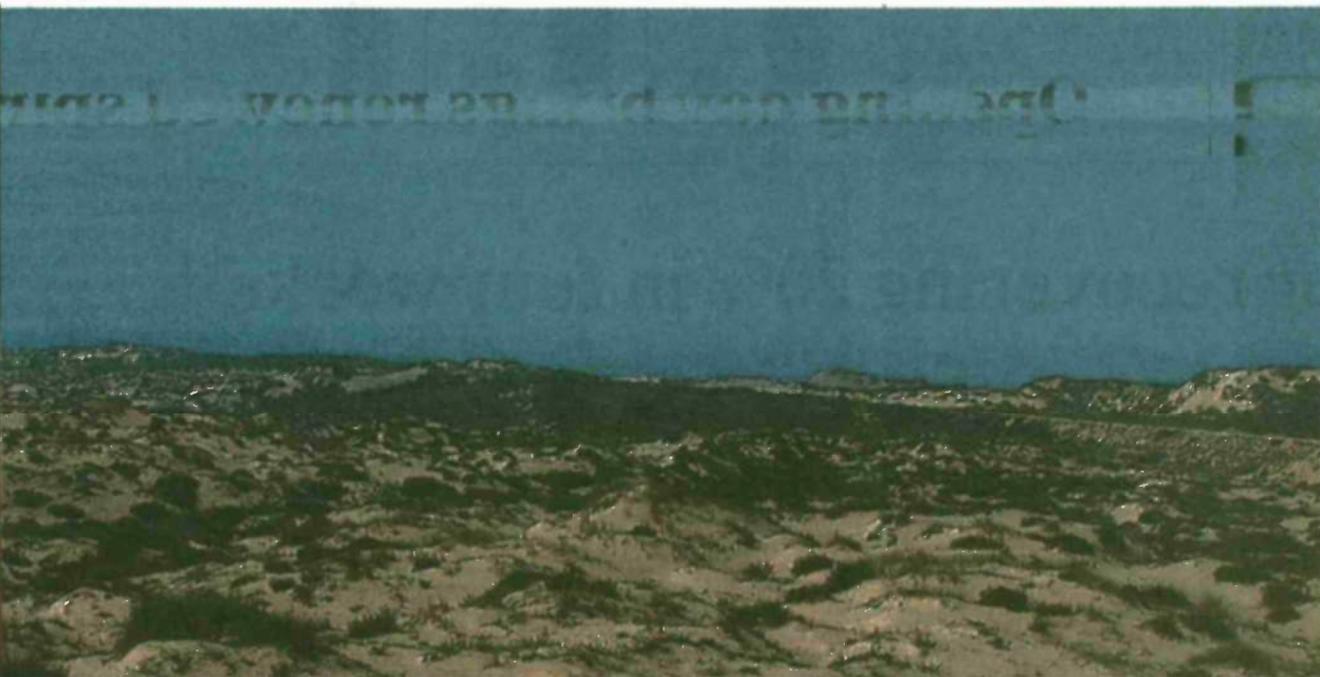
These people operate on the fringes of the closed military zones, and sometimes

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inside them, too, mainly stealing from unmanned training grounds. It works to their advantage that the land has not in fact been earmarked for preservation, and that the army hasn't bothered to take care of it – just make use of it.

The thieves have been digging away for years in peace, sometimes even having the gall to dig out the sand in which electricity poles were standing,

The survey covered 18 kilometers of coast, some of Israel's prettiest beachfront, featuring wide



An open area north of Palmachim. Will the paratroopers be replaced by housing construction?

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Soreq stream. An open sewer passing through land that has not only been neglected, but has become an environmental hazard.

leaving them dangling in mid-air. In some cases the huge holes left behind have then been utilized to dump construction waste.

Right next to a paratroopers' training ground are several illegal construction waste dumps, stretching out for miles.

Who's your daddy?

The destruction of the sand and vegetation as a result of the illegal dumping has facilitated the invasion of plants alien to the region, further decimating the natural local flora populations.

"This area shows the true face of the nation," says Adiv Gal, an ecologist by profession. "It's a face that doesn't plan a single step in advance." It is a face of unmitigated selfishness, a face of contempt for heritage, a face that cares nothing for the social significance of preservation, he goes on. Israel's remaining open spaces have no "father figure" to take care of them: abandoned, they are abused at will, he says.

One of the survey's main goals was to suggest planning alternatives for the area. Several "development threats" are already looming – as mentioned, it's the natural extension of booming central Israel. First and foremost is the city of Rishon Letzion's plan to build 10,000 housing units in land presently serving as ammunition testing grounds. Another plan foresees housing construction by the lake near Superland, and then there's Yavne's plan to build an industrial zone.

Recently the national planning authorities gave a green light, so to speak, for a plan to build a big desalination facility. The environmental preservation bodies suggested it be built next to existing infrastructure facilities, but

for the time being the authorities have decided to locate it smack in the center of the sands. Recently Rishon Letzion mayor Dov Tzur suggested that he might forgo development of the new areas by the beach. But that's hardly a promise to take to the bank.

OLI urges that action be taken to stop the neglect of the sandy area and, most important, to enforce the laws against dumping construction waste. Invasive plant species need to be eradicated and, OLI says, the authorities should not only block the sand thieves but the entry of joyriders on all-terrain vehicles who are destroying the dunes and stony hills.

The suggestion about stymieing the waste dumpers could be implemented quickly enough, with the establishment of a unit for that purpose by the Israel Nature and Parks Authority.

As for the development plans, the survey suggests Yavne move its planned industrial zone, and build it next to the existing one. It also urges the state to rethink the location of the desalination plant.

And with regard to the testing grounds by Rishon Letzion, which the army could yet abandon, the survey's authors urge that it remain an open ground for the general public. It isn't right to build housing on an area of such environmental importance, they write. It would rob the people of the sand and surf, giving it to the handful able to afford a sea view.