

DAILY NEWS

EGYPT

SPECIAL SERIES: TOURISM AND SUMMER TRENDS: Hurghada's marine life struggles under irresponsible tourism

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First Published 8/19/2008

HURGHADA: "When I spent my honeymoon on the Red Sea coast in the early 1950s we needed official permission to come to the area — it took about a month and a half to be issued."

Fifty-odd years after he spent a holiday in the wilderness, architect Samir El-Sonbati now advises the Red Sea Governorate on city planning.

He is based in Hurghada, an area which has gone from a fishing village to a sprawling city in less than 20 years.

"I've been an advisor for 12 years and nobody wants to listen. Everyday I wake up and think, 'What am I going to stop today?'" El-Sonbati told Daily News Egypt.

El-Sonbati is also a board member of HEPCA, the Hurghada Environmental Protection and Conservation Association, which has taken upon itself the unenviable task of defending the Red Sea's natural resources against the relentless encroachment of tourism and the urbanization it has spawned.

Amr Ali, HEPCA's formidable managing director, calls it "waving the flag" — an attempt to stand in the path of a mammoth profit-fueled industry deaf to conservationists and their whining about the turtles and the coral reefs.

"The stupidity of it all is that they don't see that the only reason tourists come to the Red Sea is for its natural resources," Ali explained.

"We don't have better hotels than Düsseldorf for example, or anywhere else in the world; we have nature," he said.

Concrete Maze

Hurghada's 34 km coastline embodies what HEPCA are up against.

Cluttered with hotel buildings which are often only meters from the sea's edge — or in some cases actually in the sea, constructed on artificial landfill sites — the result is a concrete barrier.

"There are people in Hurghada who don't know which direction the sea is because of the buildings blocking the skyline," El-Sonbati said, and indeed, the narrow strip of the city behind the shoreline feels like any Egyptian town: No concession seems to have been made to its unique location in the city's architecture or planning.

El-Sonbati suggests that the problem is not so much a fault in the planning, as its complete absence.

"When construction began in the Red Sea area there was absolutely no tourism planning — the area was designated for mining and for military uses," he explained.

“Tourism began with a few pioneers — it didn’t start with a strategy.

Compare this situation with Spain: When Franco decided to develop the country for tourism, a master plan was put in place and everything directed towards it.”

The haphazard way in which tourism has developed in the Red Sea area has had a devastating effect on the natural environment, in particular marine life.

“When they started selling the Red Sea coastline, they took a map divided into a blue section, the sea, a yellow section, the land, and a black line — the road,” El-Sonbati said.

“They just split up the section between the road and the sea into portions and sold them.”

Having bought their land, investors discovered that coral reefs on the shore would prevent guests from accessing the sea easily. The solution? “They put dynamite and blew up the corals,” Mahmoud El Kaissouni, a consultant to the Ministry of Tourism told Daily News Egypt.

Other methods of disposing of the corals included dredging and land-filling.

Hotel construction was to some extent controlled by the creation of natural protectorates in 1983 and a law passed in 1994, which states that any new coastline development must be at least 200 meters away from the coastline.

“There was bad practice before we started the enforcement of the law,”

Red Sea Park Manager Yasser Saied told Daily News Egypt.

“All development along the coast must now follow environmental guidelines.”

“Developers hire environmental consultants and submit environmental impact assessment studies to a Ministry of Environment committee which reviews it, and asks for amendments to bring it in line with environmental standards,” Saied explained.

El-Sonbati however is more skeptical.

“Sometimes I think that the only thing I have succeeded in doing in my 12 years as an advisor to the governor is raising the ‘fees,’” he said, gesturing with his hand under the table, in an indication of bribery.

His experience is that while the legislative framework governing construction is adequate, it is both undermined by corruption and limited by its dependence on the willingness of decision-makers to enforce it.

“There is the problem that if one [Red Sea] governor is strict, the one after him is not,” he said.

“As a result of this, developers are frightened that if they respect the 200-meter setback rule, permission will subsequently be given to another developer to construct on the land between their hotel and the sea, and the first developer will end up with a hotel in front of his.”

Standing Guard

Further compounding the problem is the lack of clarity surrounding which of the three agencies concerned (the protectorate, the governorate and the Tourism Development Agency) has the final say on the Red Sea coastline.

While Saied acknowledges that “the question of who controls the coastline is rather complicated,” El-Sonbati is more direct; “it’s like a classroom without a teacher.”

The attempted sale of the Giftun Island — a protected area — illustrates the problem.

According to HEPCA's website, Giftun is home to over 40 percent of Hurghada's dive sites, has more than 196 types of coral and almost 800 marine species.

In 2004, then Prime Minister Atef Ebeid sold the island (a protected area) for \$2 billion to an Italian development company, prompting HEPCA to launch a campaign to save the island — which was successful.

El-Sonbati describes the Red Sea's tourism industry as a "selling machine."
"It's impossible to make investors see the consequences of what they're doing," he said.

Ali says that the diving industry, over-fishing (HEPCA are lobbying for a complete ban on fishing in the Red Sea to save the area's almost depleted fish stocks), bad development and the petroleum industry are currently the biggest threats to the Red Sea.

Coral Stampede

Marine scientist Wera Leujak agrees that "the largest impact on reefs in South Sinai is currently tourism: the most popular dive sites receive more than 60,000 divers per year."

Extremely fragile, million year-old coral can be killed with the slightest touch.
"Snorkellers and swimmers are even worse, especially when they enter from land since they have to cross the shallow reef flat to reach the reef slope when they snorkel.

"This is often done by walking out to the reef flat and the impacts are disastrous," Leujak said.

Kassiouni told Daily News Egypt that a study conducted in 2004 found that over 30 percent of the Red Sea's coral reef had been destroyed by tourism.
Leujak suggests that the problem is made worse by the change in the demographics of Red Sea tourists.

"When tourism development started the reefs mainly attracted divers from Europe seeking a special dive adventure on pristine reefs. [These divers] were environmentally aware, hence not causing much harm.

"With the increasing number of hotels it became more and more difficult to fill them, therefore, rooms were sold as cheap package deals, attracting a clientele with less money to spend and also less environmentally aware.

"This shift in clientele is very apparent in Hurghada, but has started in South Sinai during the last five years as well."

HEPCA educates Red Sea visitors about how to dive responsibly as well as policing the Red Sea coast.

Wrongdoers are hauled into Ali's office for a dressing-down and often receive steep fines.

El-Sonbati is critical of the tourism development model still being implemented in the Red Sea area.

"We're still applying the Hurghada model all the way down the coastline — there is no planning.

"If we're still continuing this type of construction in 10 years it will be a catastrophe,

"What is needed is a functioning community — like Gouna for example, which has schools and mosques and churches — tourists don't just stay in their hotels for two weeks.

"You can't just build a hotel on one side and have workers' dormitories [divided] into male and female

sections on the other, and lock tourists in between the hotel and the sea, and still expect to have a healthy community.”

“We should never have put up the Red Sea for mass tourism. It’s a very special area, but most of the investors don’t see this.”