

Assad Serhal (Lebanon)

Director General / Society for the Protection of Nature in Lebanon (SPNL)



Remarks

It is a very great honor to receive the MIDORI Prize, not only as the first person from Lebanon but also as a representative of the entire troubled Middle East region. The list of laureates for this prize is impressive - a wonderful collection of people, many of whom I know and all of whom I respect. It is a privilege and honor to join such a distinguished group of human beings. Thank you very much for this honor.

In 1982 I initiated efforts to co-establish the Society for the Protection of Nature in Lebanon – SPNL. In 1993, SPNL became the first organization from Lebanon to join the IUCN. IUCN helped initiating the concept for the first three protected areas

project in Lebanon. I was later hired as the first Lebanese Nature Reserve Manager at the Al-Shouf Cedar Nature Reserve, where I helped establish the reserve and train guides and guards – some of whom are still active in reserve management today – and very successfully brought it to the highest level of global recognition.

I owe amazing and unique international organizations such as IUCN and Bird Life International for the MIDORI Prize. I wish to extend my appreciation to them.

Winning The MIDORI Prize provides more exposure to our Hima revival efforts to help conserve biodiversity and empower local stakeholders and communities. It also provides a boost to our efforts in SPNL to stay the course that we have been leading for the last 30 years, to Hima and Homat Al-Hima (Young Nature Heroes) in our region, for better and more sustainable use of natural resources, as well as better engagement with the private sector and greater focus on the socio-economic sectors.

It goes without saying that winning the MIDORI Prize will lead to changes not only in my life and family –Zeina, Adel and Sary – but many others at SPNL and throughout our region, and for that we are eternally grateful.

Achievement

Efforts to conserve biodiversity are a challenge throughout the world, but even more so in conflict zones such as the Middle East, where the challenges to conservation take on totally different, often unreal dimensions. Given the reasons mentioned below, the contributions made by Mr. Assad Serhal to biodiversity are well deserving of the MIDORI Prize.

The Middle East is one of the most important, yet threatened, flyways for migratory birds. Lebanon is a small country with rich habitat diversity, but also the home country to Mr. Serhal, who took it upon himself to protect it as his mission. He did this despite the country being in a state of civil war, by venturing into nature conservation using the knowledge gained from studying wildlife ecology management in the United States.

Early on, having noted that North American and Western European models for nature conservation and management failed to resonate with local communities in the Middle East, he devised a new program for nature preservation that addressed such shortcomings, which led in 1984 to him founding the Society for the Protection of Nature in Lebanon (SPNL). SPNL revolutionized conservation in Lebanon by revitalizing HIMA (“protected area” in Arabic) – the traditional system of community based conservation, through scientific and social research. Mr. Serhal asserted that both facets of HIMA – human empowerment and local culture – are needed in nature conservation, and that both must progress together in unison. He contributed to the establishment of three nature reserves, four bird areas, 22 HIMAS covering terrestrial, wetlands and marine habitats in the Middle East, and five programmes and a strategy on conservation for SPNL.

Adding to the above achievements, international institutions such as the IUCN, MAVA Foundation, and BirdLife International have all adopted the HIMA approach, and Mr. Serhal also assisted in establishing the Hima Fund in Qatar. In short, the HIMA Revival has gained traction far beyond the borders of the Middle East and is now seen as a model for conservation the world over.

Mr. Serhal’s career, which germinated with a dream of protecting the biodiversity and habitats of his homeland, has accomplished this and so much more. He is an ardent conservationist, a passionate humanitarian, and a source of inspiration to his associates worldwide.