

# **The Public's Role as a Stakeholder in the Management Decision Making Process of the Yarqon River Authority in Israel**

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The Yarqon River is situated in the center of Israel, flowing through the country's major population center. It is the main channel of a watershed which reaches into the Palestine Authority in the East and the Mediterranean Sea in the West. Over 50 years ago, the headwaters of the Yarqon were captured to supply water to the homes, factories and farmers of Israel for industrial, agricultural and domestic purposes. The reduced flow, coupled with sewage and industrial waste, severely reduced the quality and the quantity of water in the river.

In 1955 major flooding focused attention on the pitiful state of rivers and streams in Israel, resulting in the passing of the Rivers and Streams Authorities Law of 1965. Under this law the Yarqon River Authority (YRA), Israel's first river authority, was established. The law created a public body whose major stakeholders are representatives of the local authorities most attuned to the river's needs and the public's needs. Today the Yarqon River and its environs are one of the most beautiful recreation sites in Israel, visited annually by millions of local residents and tourists. It has been transformed from an embarrassment to a showcase for recreational use of rivers and streams in Israel.

What is unique about the Yarqon River Authority is the rare combination of theory and practice (theorists and practitioners). The YRA, from its inception, accepted its limitations as a government institution. For this reason, the Authority has built its reputation on the public, both the statutory public sitting on its board, and the general public actively involved in its processes. The openness of the deliberations of the institution, the willingness to accept public criticism; the link with academic institutions; all this has led to the formation of the YRA as a successful governing authority.

Public participation takes place on several levels. The primary level was dictated by

the law itself, which required that the Authority conduct its activities under a Master Plan. The Master Plan process, which included the statutory stakeholders of the Authority, and hundreds of stakeholders from local authorities, NGO's and the general public, led to the preparation of a statutory outline plan for the entire watershed. At the same time, improved water quality, the second goal of the master plan, is moving apace with Government financial support and encouragement from cyclists, rowers, farmers and local residents who use the River and its banks daily. Public participation is also encouraged through interaction with the public beyond the demands of the law. The YRA publishes its plans, initiates public debate and invites input from the public.

This process proves that although public participation in long-range planning is time consuming and complex, it is the appropriate way to proceed when dealing with a watershed that encompasses seven municipalities, requires the approval of numerous government agencies, and affects the interests of so many people. Being the first to prepare and administer a master plan for a river, the YRA has served as an example to other River Authorities in Israel. The Master Plan process also proves that increased public involvement can be a positive catalyst for stream and river rehabilitation.