Beyond Seasonality
Extending the Tourism Season Expands Income Opportunities for Local Community

Project Background

Jordan Valley Links (JVL) is a five-year project implemented by MEDA and funded by Global Affairs Canada (GAC) which aims to assist 25,000 women and youth entrepreneurs (WYE) in the Jordan Valley region to establish and maintain income generation activities. To meet their targets, JVL utilizes two approaches: improving the business acumen of WYE’s and reducing the barriers they experience in accessing markets and financial services. JVL operates in the food processing, community-based tourism, clean technology sectors and access to finance sectors.

Ecotourism in Jordan

Subsequent regional conflicts, including the 2003 Iraq war and the ongoing violence in Syria and Iraq, have heavily impacted Jordan’s tourism industry, causing tourist numbers to fall. However, tourism in Jordan is on the rise again with 8-10% annual growth since 2016¹. As tourists return to Jordan, ecotourism has become an increasingly popular option for travellers as global awareness of environmental impact has risen in recent years. Jordan represents a model for ecotourism enterprises as it is one of the few Middle Eastern countries currently supporting such endeavours. Jordan was among the first in the region to take advantage of ecotourism with the establishment of the Dana Biosphere through the Royal Society for the Conservation of Nature (RSCN) in 1989. Environmental degradation (i.e. scarcity of water, decline in animal populations, etc.) have created a multitude of opportunities for the expansion of the ecotourism sector and for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). According to statistics provided by RSCN, ecotourism projects in Jordan generated approximately JOD 1.5 million (CAD $2,847,984.16) in 2015 with 175,000 visitors to nature reserves throughout the country (65% of which were foreigners²).

¹ The tourism sector’s performance indicators showed a rise in the number of overnight tourists, which reached about 860,000 by the end of November 2018, constituting an increase of 8 per cent compared with the same period of 2017, while the number of one-day visitors was 721,325, up by 7.8 per cent from the same period last year, the statement added. http://www.jordantimes.com/news/local/tourism-revenues-surpass-5-billion-mark-2018

The ecotourism industry also represents an opportunity to preserve cultural heritage and to maintain sustainable communities, particularly for the Bedouin population in Jordan.

Many young Bedouin men have taken to becoming guides for tourists in many of the popular attractions throughout Jordan, most notably Petra, Wadi Rum and Feynan Ecolodge. The rise of ecotourism efforts in Jordan has created a multitude of employment options that allows them to earn a steady income while also providing tourists with an authentic Bedouin experience that serves as a foundation for cross-cultural dialogue and preservation of traditional Bedouin culture. An increased focus on environmentally sustainable principles (i.e. reducing vehicle traffic on certain trails, better waste management, etc.) also helps preserve the natural ecosystem that serves as both an attraction for tourists and a key pillar to Bedouin society3.

This delicate balance between environmental and cultural preservation represents a significant prospect for investment by SMEs in Jordan and aligns well with the goals of the JVL project, namely environmental sustainability and empowering women and youth entrepreneurs (WYEs).

An Introduction to Feynan Ecolodge and Current Issues

Located in the Wadi Araba area of the Dana Biosphere Reserve, Feynan Ecolodge operates under the following guiding principles:

• Providing guests with unique and authentic experiences.
• Contributing to the conservation work of the Dana Biosphere Reserve.
• Benefitting and empowering the local community.
• Minimizing the environmental footprint of all operations and activities.
• Providing environmental awareness, education, and interpretation to guests, staff and the local community.

Originally built in 2005 with RSCN funding, the lodge is currently run by a local Jordanian company called EcoHotels. The most striking characteristics of the lodge are its remote location, its commitment to environmental and social responsibility, and the way it synthesizes local Bedouin culture into its activities and programs. Functioning completely off the electrical grid, the lodge sources its electricity from a photo-voltaic (PV) system (solar generated power) and has recently implemented a system to recycle waste water and kitchen waste to produce biogas that is used in for cooking, and water that is used to irrigate newly planted native trees.

Feynan Ecolodge benefits the local Bedouin community by hiring its staff exclusively from local families as either on-site staff or suppliers for food and other products and services (ex. candles, leather, transfers, guides, etc.). Over half of the income generated by the lodge stays in the immediate local community, which directly benefits over 80 families or over 400 people.

With the decline in tourism in Jordan following the Arab Spring and the emergence of ISIS, the losses previously absorbed by Feynan Ecolodge due to limited operations in the hot summer months was no longer possible. The very hot summers in Wadi Araba and the absence of any cooling meant that Feynan’s business experienced a massive slowdown for 4-5 months every year. While this slowdown was previously compensated for sufficient revenue during the peak seasons, with dwindling tourist numbers even in the peak season due to the decline in Jordan’s tourism, the lodge could no longer depend on revenues from its peak season (75-80% of the lodge’s revenue comes from 6 months of operations).

The lack of cooling measures (due to the fact that the lodge is off the grid with a small PV system) and the absence of sufficient shading meant that visitors would find it too hot to sleep, and EcoHotels would post warnings on its website to ensure potential guests were aware of this issue before visiting. The lodge was thus unable to fully benefit from the summer tourism period in Jordan. The impact of climate change as temperature patterns become less predictable with very hot periods beginning earlier in late April and extending later into October has also increasingly impacted Feynan’s two peak visitor seasons (March to May, and mid-September to November), making conditions for guests uncomfortable and putting people off from visiting. On TripAdvisor, many comments left by visitors to the lodge in the summer mention the intense heat and their desire for some sort of cooling system. These comments reflect the reason behind a significant drop in visitors to the lodge during this period (Figure 1).

This overall reduction in the number of visitors, both due to reduced tourism in Jordan and the seasonal drop due to hot weather at Feynan, dramatically impacted the benefits to the local community, which had dropped by 30% in 2016 alone. The lodge would no longer be financially viable if occupancy rates were not improved during the summer months. As an example, data provided below by Feynan Ecolodge demonstrates seasonal changes in incomes of drivers (who are individual entrepreneurs) used by the lodge during the months of June to August for the years 2015 to 2018 (Figure 2).

![Visitor Numbers](image1.png)

![Drivers' Income](image2.png)
JVL Intervention

The problem presented to JVL was simple: If the seasonality issue at Feynan is not addressed, the ecolodge would cease to be financially viable and would be unable to continue operations, causing further job losses impacting the livelihoods of staff and associated community businesses and suppliers.

Financial Impact

In late 2017, EcoHotels approached the JVL project with a proposal to mitigate the seasonality issue at Feynan Ecolodge. The grant, which was successfully commissioned in July 2018, assisted with the installation of cooling measures on the premises which included a new PVC system (commissioned in August 2018) and helped increase the energy capacity of the lodge. These measures are expected to assist with increasing occupancy rates during the summer and stabilizing revenues throughout the year. Once the occupancy rates increase and stability is returned, Feynan will use part of the grant to support new micro-businesses in the area that could benefit from increased year-round tourism (Figure 3). The mission and values of Feynan Ecolodge align with those of MEDA and JVL. The success of this enterprise means further economic opportunities for the local community.

![Image](Figure 3 | Expected Outcomes for Investing in Feynan Ecolodge)

Although too early to measure the increased occupancy due to JVL’s investment in PV and cooling measures for Feynan Ecolodge, early indications show increased number of visitors during August and September 2018 as compared to the same period in 2017. For the first time however, the ecolodge has removed their summer heat warning from their reservations website for the hot months.

![Image](Figure 4: The new PVC system which was successfully installed in August 2018)
Social/Community Impact(s)

The presence of Feynan Ecolodge has assisted many people in the area with their business pursuits, particularly women. As women become more involved with income-generating activities, their share of decision-making in the household increases. Local communities in the region (i.e. Feynan, Greigra, and Rashaydeh) have very traditional attitudes concerning career prospects for women. That is, if women are to have careers it should coincide with their traditional role of homemaker, such as jobs in teaching or in home-based businesses such as handmade items or food processing. Currently, few women are involved directly with the Lodge or businesses supported by the lodge. There is a belief that close contact with men (tourists) will bring shame to any women involved. Despite this, there are opportunities to empower women in their communities and encourage male champions who in turn can encourage women in the area to become more involved in their own businesses.

Abu Thabet owns and operates a successful mobile camping service alongside his wife, Rabia. They also have two other women working with them to provide services to tourists such as laundry, cleaning, and even authentic food experiences. Commenting on this experience, Rabia said, “I’m so proud of what I’m doing and I’m sure that I’m a role model for other women in the community!” Eman, who runs the only business selling clothing in the area, believes that she is a role model for the community and enjoys the success that her business has brought to her household as she now has a say in household expenses.

Tourists primarily spend their time at Feynan Ecolodge to participate in activities such as Bedouin experiences and hiking. As such, the lodge and its customers are the main customers for those who operate businesses associated with the lodge. Ahmad, who runs Wadi Araba Cycling in Greigra village, says: “Without the lodge, I would never be able to establish and sustain my business.” This affects the way in which the Bedouin community interacts with tourists and presents an opportunity to encourage entrepreneurs in the area to develop more diverse businesses to attract tourists to the villages outside of the lodge. For example, there are currently no facilities such as cafés or shops in which tourists can visit in these villages.

Environmental Impact

Climate change has several and diverse impacts on communities’ livelihoods and natural resources. Increasing temperatures have negatively affected the tourism industry in Feynan. Feynan Ecolodge could not operate comfortably during hot months because of the effects of climate change, specifically longer and more unpredictable periods of hot weather. Cooling, with the additional energy needs it requires, quickly became a priority for Feynan Ecolodge as a way of maintaining current occupancy rates and boosting occupancy during the summer months.

Providing a PV system to Feynan Ecolodge not only supports the financial stability of surrounding communities but also contributes to the vision of environmental sustainability. The 25.75 KWp system generates around 56.4 MWh/year, which if generated from the only viable alternative, a diesel generator, would produce 72 metric tons of CO$_2$ annually. Feynan thus prevents 72 metric tons of CO$_2$ from being produced by utilizing renewable energy sources. Figure 5 illustrates this impact.  

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4 CO$_2$ emissions calculated according to the results of this paper: Jakhrani, A. et al, 2012, Estimation of Carbon Footprints from Diesel Generator Emissions. International Conference in Green and Ubiquitous Technology, Bandung, Indonesia
Figure 5 | Feynan emission saving (EPA Greenhouse Gas Equivalencies Calculator)
Globally, only 31% of ecolodges use renewable energy to meet their needs (IFC Ecolodges Exploring Opportunity Report). Feynan Ecolodge’s focus on utilizing renewable energy distinguishes it from most ecolodges as well as other tourism businesses in Jordan.

Feynan Ecolodge has become an educational hub for environmental awareness. Staff and local businesses are educated on the importance of energy conservation and waste management from their involvement at the lodge itself and their interactions with tourists. Families living in and around Feynan are witnessing changed waste management and energy consumption practices, as demonstrated by the ecolodge, and are slowly adapting their own practices. This situation has the potential for greater environmental awareness in the community.

Building off its commitment to environmental sustainability and its growing reputation in environmental stewardship, Feynan Ecolodge attracts tourists to the area which in turn benefits communities in the surrounding area. JVL's investment in Feynan Ecolodge’s PV system is thus not only positively impacting the environment but also contributing to social and economic progress for the surrounding communities. The investment serves to support Feynan Ecolodge’s business model for socially impactful ecotourism.