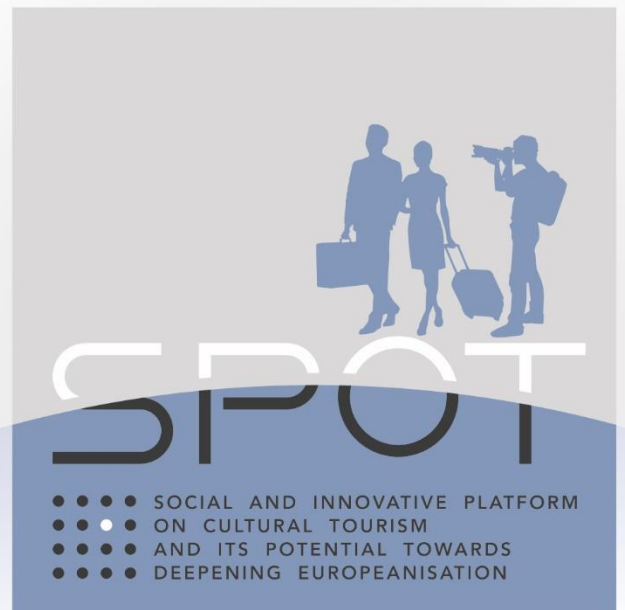


ISRAEL

POLICY BRIEF



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Valley of Springs regional council and Bet-She'an town

For local policymakers

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Introduction

BIU's case study area is peripheral; however, it is not homogenous. It consists of a rural area (Valley of Springs regional council) and an urban area (the town of Beit She'an). The Valley of Springs offers numerous and diversified tourism sites and activities, most of them are natural, and the others are man-made. The area's cultural and other touristic assets are managed and operated by a few authorities/bodies, most of which are state affiliated with no local affiliation. In particular, the area holds more than 40 natural springs, birdwatching spots, historical sites, fabulous bridges, and unique flora and fauna. Among the most visited sites is Valley of the Springs Trail which is a 140 km long circular track; it passes through many springs, streams, mountains, forests, and archaeological sites. The most popular site is the Gan HaShlosha (Sahne) National Park. This park, as well as others, is under the responsibility and management of the Israel National Parks and Natural Reserves. The Jewish National Fund is responsible for the Gilboa Nature Reserve, which covers 1829 hectares and includes Mount Saul, Saul's Shoulders, Tel Jezreel, the Hidden Valley and other sites. Ten out

of 25 settlements in the regional council operate B&B facilities for overnighters, most of them are privately owned and considered small to medium businesses. Other than accommodations, about 12 settlements offer activities such as Reflexology, Shiatsu and Cosmetics, Wood Carving and art Workshops, Horse Farm, Bicycle Rental, Heritage Sites, Agricultural Visitor Center, Bird Center, Museum, and last but not least, is the Kangaroos Park (6.7 hectares) which attracts numerous visitors each year. The council also supports local tourism in the settlements themselves. This includes support in cultural events, exhibitions and festivals. Finally, the Israeli Council for Conservation of heritage Sites is responsible for heritage sites in the kibbutzim themselves and promotes activities that attract local tourism. While there are no formal data regarding the economic reliance of the regional councils on tourism, most of the settlements in the region operate successful industrial plants, as well as agricultural production and services. Although, there are no formal statistics on visitors' numbers and over-night staying in the regional council of the Valley of Springs, based on data collected by Israeli National Parks and Natural Reserves, in 2018 Gan HaShlosha national park was ranked second in popularity among domestic tourists, and it dropped to the 8th place in 2020. Altogether, these suggest that despite the richness and uniqueness of the region, it has still a long way to fulfill its potential among domestic tourists and more importantly, among incoming tourists.



Fig. 1 Ein Shokek- Valley of Springs Park. Source: <https://www.yolo-blog.com/ein-shokek/>

In 2016, the Regional Council of the Valley of Springs initiated the Slow Tourism initiative, calling tourists to enjoy hiking trails and natural springs (slow tourism has become a global trend in recent years). However, this initiative did not reach maturity and its potential was not materialized. COVID-19, which outbreaked in Israel by early 2020, has probably contributed to this.



As for the town of Beit She'an, the town hosts several cultural and historical sites, most of them managed by the Israeli Antiquities Authority. A dominant attraction is the Beit She'an National Park, which houses the ruins of the Roman and Byzantine city of Beit She'an. This park hosts several attractions of high international importance, the most prominent of which is the Roman Theater. The town itself provides limited support to the tourism sector. Albeit this low involvement, in 2015 via a joint initiative of the municipality of Beit She'an and the Jewish National Fund, the Eucalyptus Park was opened for the residents of Beit She'an and the surrounding area, with an investment of 7 million Euros. The park includes 10 hectares of lawns, shady corners, ornamental corners, playgrounds and unique water attractions. The park should be a significant entertainment anchor for the residents of the town and the surrounding area, and attract visitors from all over the country who will visit the tourist centres in the Beit She'an National Park and the entire valley.



Fig. 2 The Beit She'an National Park. Source: Israeli National Parks and Natural Reserves

Finally, the South Jordan Drainage and Streams Authority are responsible for the development of scenic landscapes and the restoration, preservation, and development of sites in the region. The rehabilitation actions include returning endemic species to the river area. The scenic restoration includes the arrangement of hiking trails, and the establishment and accessibility of sites, vegetation and places of recreation, including wading pools.

Based on data from the Ministry of Peripheral Development the town is attracting about 250,000 visitors annually (prior to COVID-19) and it was ranked 20th on the list of the most visited destinations of foreign tourists in 2018. Although there was some upward trend in the number of tourists to the town, the numbers are still far from being sufficient. Moreover, the tourists who are coming, do not stay more than a few hours in the town and spend their money in other places. This poses a serious challenge since the economic basis of Beit She'an is not solid, and it is dependent on tourism development.



A common challenge to both Beit She'an and the Valley of Springs is that they only marginally attract incoming tourists resulting in a large share of domestic visitors who do not stay in the area for long hauls. This is largely due to limited accessibility to the area, which locates far from the country's main metropolitan areas. There are no high-speed, multi-lane, highways, and public transport is not sufficient in terms of frequency as well as first-and-last-mile travel behaviour (for example, while there is a train to Bet-She'an, it reaches only the outskirts of the town), resulting in frequent traffic congestion, and long and tedious driving. With no sufficient accommodation facilities in both municipalities (especially for large organized groups), day visiting is challenging. This, in turn, leads to a negative feedback loop; low accessibility and lack of accommodation facilities result in stagnation in the number of visitors, which in turn de-incentivizes investment initiatives in accommodation and other facilities in the area.

The **COVID-19 pandemic** led to a massive reduction in visitors and the various lockdowns resulted in a high proportion of tourism businesses shut down for long periods of time beginning in March 2020. The area does not enjoy powerful local governance which can lobby for government support. Accordingly, business owners reported that they received partial or no assistance from the government, and many were forced to furlough their employees, with some laying off employees completely. Most business owners reported that their financial ability to withstand the crisis is only for a few months. This means that many businesses are in danger of collapsing and closing their activities.

1. Evidence and Analysis

BIU through the EU-funded SPOT cultural tourism project collected qualitative and quantitative data via several means including 1. In-depth interviews were conducted with officials in both municipalities including managers of heritage sites.; 2. Surveys among samples of residents, visitors and tourism businesses; 3. Two roundtable meetings were held with local entrepreneurs in order to obtain their wider viewpoints; 4. Field trips in the region to both municipalities. While the surveys were conducted in late 2020, the roundtable meeting took place in late 2021 and 2022. An additional short survey of business owners (containing Covid-19-related questions only) was also conducted in late 2021. The answers to this second survey were somewhat different and it seems that the additional year spent coping with the pandemic expanded the potential solutions for coping with the pandemic's effects. The collected data were integrated and processed to allow drawing insights and describe the main problems faced by each municipality as well as common problems both face.

The evidence brought below, demonstrates how a lack of information-based planning, cooperation and the shortage of skilled managerial labour (the human factor) can inhibit the development of a viable tourism sector in an area that is abundant with rare natural assets and rich with important cultural and historical sites.

1.1. The town of Beit She'an

Beit She'an town has a relatively low socio-economic profile resulting in **low-skilled labor, and limited tools and knowledge required to develop, design, and operate a proliferating tourism sector**. Its residents suffer from a lack of access to capital and there are no institutions for higher education in the vicinity of the town. As a result, the young generation is leaving the town. This leads

to a vicious circle, in which, a lack of employment opportunities, drives the young, educated citizens away from Beit She'an, which in turn reduces the odds of tourism development. In addition, Beit She'an's unique micro-climate (with **extremely hot summers**) leads to **high seasonality**, more than the average in the industry.

In Beit She'an municipality there is **no official who is responsible for tourism**. The town relies on a group of volunteers, with limited capacity, resources, and information. This is a major problem that cannot be bypassed.

What seems to prevent any progress in the tourism sector in Beit She'an are **political issues and internal intrigues that inhibit long-term planning**. Each new mayor initiates new plans and abandons/cancels part of the initiatives of its formers. During the period of the project, we received little cooperation from the municipality, we got minimal access to information (sometimes because the information does not exist). Officials in the municipality seem to have lost faith in receiving support from the central government.

The most striking manifestation of these problems in Beit She'an is the **negligence surrounding a number of its tourist assets**; Historic sites from the Roman period are standing empty for long periods. Most of these historic sites do have limited number of complementary sites in their surroundings (restaurants and other attractions) and there is a severe shortage of accommodation facilities) which indicates a lack of supporting initiative.

The fact that tourist activity is managed and promoted by state bodies has a two-folded effect on the tourism sector in the region. On the one hand, due to the lack of highly skilled professionals in tourism management and operation at the local level, these bodies are in a better position to hire high-skilled professionals from out of the region. On the other hand, some of the festivals, and other mass events (e.g., 'Beit She'an Nights') that are supported by these government bodies are not coordinated with the town of Beit Sh'ean which in turn does not benefit economically from these events.

1.2. Valley of Springs regional council

The regional council hosts several anchor attractions including Kangaroos Park and Gan HaShlosa. However, the rest are small businesses, and most of them are family-held. **There are no medium-sized tourist attractions. Moreover, these small sites are outdated, not professionally managed and run.** There is a significant lack of holistic destination management that takes into account compatibility between neighbouring attractions, based on visitors' preferences for diversity and attractions' complementarities.

1.3. Common problems

Most of the bodies that run the major tourist attractions in the area are government bodies (e.g., the Jewish National Fund, Israel National Parks and Natural Reserves, and Israel Antiquities Authority), therefore there is no encouragement of private initiatives. A good example is a fact that the Drainage Authority is responsible for developing scenic tourism in the Valley of Springs. All these government bodies state that they are working to develop local tourism for the benefit of the local population, but the fact stands out that for all of them, managers are not necessarily residents of the area.



Both municipalities demonstrate an inadequate (if any) systematic marketing strategy, with Beit She'an even less marketing oriented. There is no exhaustive platform that provides in one place all data required to potential visitors in an easy and tractable manner. Both municipalities' websites, including the pages with touristic information, do not have English versions, which emphasizes the lack of orientation to overseas tourists.

2. Policy Implications and Recommendations

Based on the accumulated data and evidence we recommend the following policy:

- As noted by Edwards Deming 'Without data, you're just another person with an opinion'. One of the most pertaining issues arising from our study is the lack of formal, consistently collected, quantitative tourism data. There is an urgent need to assign a body that will be in charge of periodical data collection regarding tourism arrivals (domestic and incoming), overnight stays, the number of visitors to the different sites etc. Such data are crucial to understanding trends, seasonality, and for prediction. Periodical surveys among visitors are needed to document visitors' expenditures in the area, in order to measure the economic contribution of tourism to the different sectors of the local economy.
- An important end-users of tourism data in the area are tourism destination managers appointed by each municipality. Currently, there are no such positions in the municipalities. It is important to assign resources to fill these positions. In the regional council, it is recommended to have a manager in each settlement. These officials are recommended to establish a forum for advancing tourism in the entire region.
- There is a lack of long-term data and knowledge-based destination planning. This is reflected in sporadic local initiatives which are usually not reaching maturity. Therefore, there is a need for holistic long-term destination planning that would focus on attraction/site design and development and compatibility. Visitor attractions are considered the *raison d'être* for tourism destinations to exist, and a key pull factor for destination development. Destinations can benefit from developing a carefully designed and balanced bundle of attractions and thereby exploit potential synergies and external economics.
- It is important to build trust and coordination between the town and the regional council. The town and the regional council offer complementary tourism sites (natural, water, and wildlife vs. cultural and historic sites). These complementarities can be used for the benefit of both municipalities, but it requires a joint marketing strategy and efforts to enhance collaboration rather than competition.
- Climate change. Given the temperature rise and the particular location of the area, which is characterized by extremely hot summers, indoor activities need to be developed in new and existing sites. Given that the regional council hosts numerous springs, indoor facilities as well as the development of 'night tourism' are more important in Beit She'an town. Developing night tourism will help the town to benefit from the events organized by government bodies by setting up cafes and restaurants along the paths leading from the city to the antiquities sites. In order to promote night tourism, the town will benefit from cooperation with the regional council; visitors to the area could be recommended to spend the hot summer days in and around the cool springs in the regional council and spend the nights in Beit She'an's cultural and historical site, creating this an attractive bundle of experience.



- There is a dearth of government support and management in this area. This includes subsidized loans, workshops, and mentoring from the phase of planning till the ongoing operation.
- Based on these challenges and the policy implications we have drawn above; we strongly recommend the adoption of the SPOT-IT tool as a key management tool for decision-making at all levels. The tool can provide an ideal platform for documenting all tourism-related data, processing them, and providing the most updated data at any time. The tool can offer good visualization of data, by the conversion of numbers into GIS layers. The tool can allow a spatial 'view from above' of the entire area and help identify opportunities and deficiencies of complementary facilities and infrastructure. It can promote collaboration between the regional council and the town, by providing a common platform for tourism managers. Finally, public participation in tourism development is currently in its infancy in the area, is accommodated by the tool, and can be improved by it.



Project Identity

Project name	Social and innovative Platform on Cultural Tourism and its potential towards deepening Europeanisation (SPOT)
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