



### **Honoring Azaria Alon, the voice of nature, at 90**

One of the most spectacular natural phenomena of Israel is the abundance of wildflowers, some of which cannot be found elsewhere on the globe. Just 50 years ago, during Israel's early years, some of these flowers were on the verge of extinction. This unprecedented conservation success is associated with the actions of the Society for Protection of Nature in Israel (SPNI), which Azaria Alon founded together with Prof. Amotz Zahavi. Azaria went on to become the General Secretary of SPNI from 1969 to 1977, and took part in creating the network of Field Study Centers. He participated in and led numerous campaigns for protecting Israel's natural and cultural heritages, trying to secure a sane environment for future generations.

Azaria Alon was born in 1918 in Ukraine, and in 1925 he immigrated to Israel with his family. At the age of 20 he joined Kibbutz Beit HaShita (“Home of the *Acacia*” in Hebrew), where he is still a member. Today, past the age of 90, his energy and devotion to nature conservation has not faded. Azaria often said: “I am not concerned with nature, it is humans that I am concerned with. How can a man live without birds, butterflies, and flowers?” His voice can still be heard on weekends, on his radio show (which was first aired in 1959!), urging the public to go out and visit some particular natural site, or raising public awareness about a conservation issue. For us, as for hundreds of thousands if not millions of people in Israel, the deep voice of Azaria Alon on his radio program about nature on Saturday morning is an influential memory that attracted us to nature, and, among other influences, turned us into scientists. Azaria was active in creating the Governmental Nature Reserves Authority (today the Israel Nature and Parks Authority), and helped in determining the borders of nature reserves and national parks of Israel. He was a member of Life & Environment, the umbrella organization for environmental NGOs in Israel, and took part in international activities, for example, in the International Union for Conservation of Nature conferences.

Azaria Alon is an educator. He uses every possible means to bring the beauty and diversity of nature and the need to protect it to all people. He does it in the simplest and most effective way, i.e., on foot (probably his favorite way), leading hikes and tours, by testifying in governmental committees, or using the media in all its forms. He has published hundreds of articles in daily papers and periodicals, and over 50 books for all ages. His books are read to toddlers and read by university students. Some of his books have been translated into English and Arabic, and are an essential item in the library of many Israeli homes. One of his most important achievements was editing the *Encyclopedia of Plant and Animal Life of Israel* (12 volumes, written by the leading scientists in Israel). This encyclopedia is a major source of knowledge for teaching and educating, and has been cited and probably will be cited in the future in numerous scientific papers.

Azaria’s work has been acknowledged in the many prizes he has earned. He has received, together with the SPNI, the Israel Prize, the Knesset Prize, and the Yigal Alon Prize for Life Activities. He has been nominated to the Global 500 Laureate Roll of Honour of the United Nations Environmental Programme (UNEP). This award is granted to individuals and organizations for outstanding achievement in protecting the environment. But beyond prizes, Azaria Alon will always be a role model for many environmentalists, and his successful campaigns to save the land, and the rich natural history library with which he has endowed the public, will be carried into the future as a tribute to a great man.

We are proud to edit this special issue of the *Israel Journal of Plant Sciences* in honor of Azaria Alon. Understandably, this issue focuses on plants, with aspects of environmental problems, plant–animal interactions, the vegetal landscape, biodiversity, and conservation.

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