

THE GUARDIAN'S JOB

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Dating back to biblical times, the Dead Sea is now disappearing. And Oded Rahav won't let that happen.

This is the story of a man and the sea.

Not just any sea. The Dead Sea. Where Lot's wife, with one fleeting, forbidden look back, got turned into a pillar of salt. And where the Bible tells us Jesus Christ was baptized.

For the last two years, it's been the sole obsession of Oded Rahav, an Israeli entrepreneur, environmental activist, and long-distance swimmer who created the nonprofit foundation Dead Sea Guardians to save the historic body of water from the ravages of man-made activities such as diversion and pollution.

His unintentional immersion can be traced back to 2016, when a swimmer friend told him of the dire straits this sea is facing.





A couple of years previously, Rahav and five of his friends had participated in a record-breaking 236-mile swim from Cyprus to Israel to raise awareness of the overuse of plastics that contaminate the oceans. It was one of many charitable and game-changer events Rahav had initiated and swum in since he took up the sport.

“I wasn’t born a fish—I didn’t start swimming until I was 34 years old,” he says. “But I realized that swimming was a way to serve as an example and educate people about causes without hitting them over the head with facts. It became a gentle form of activism. After all, we’re wearing swimsuits. Nothing to hide, and sports is a fun way to call people to join in.”

Although Rahav, like the millions of tourists who have sought its healing powers, had floated in the Dead Sea countless times, he—and nobody else—had ever attempted to swim its super-salted waters.



"It's so salty that you go into the water, and you have no weight," he explains. "You float like a rubber duck or a surfboard. You are safe floating, but for swimming, it can be dangerous. If the salt gets in your eyes, it can cause sores, and if you swallow the water, the salt can choke you. Some have died in its waters."

The very idea, he knew, was "as crazy as swimming on the Moon. The first reaction of people when they heard about it was, 'You will die.'"

After 18 months of preparation, which involved getting permission from the Kingdom of Jordan to cross the border, Rahav and 27 other swimmers from nine countries took the historic plunge.

"The Olympic committee declared that it was the most complicated sports event ever held," Rahav says, adding that the unprecedented swim, which was endorsed by Virgin Group's Sir Richard Branson, had 120 collaborators, plus eight boats and a large crew.

The pumped-up swimmers arrived at the Jordanian shore of the Dead Sea by boat, and donning full-face masks, they swam, freestyle, the 11 miles to Israel, a feat that took seven and a half hours and set a Guinness World Record.

"When I swim, I have a conversation with the water," Rahav says. "I al-

ways ask permission to enter the water, and I always thank it at the end. I fell in love with the Dead Sea, and I kept saying, 'Don't worry. Someone—government, stakeholders—will come along and save you.'"

But no one did.

"I kept coming back to the Dead Sea every month to visit and talk to it," he says. "Two years ago, I made a decision: I decided that I have to save it."

Just in case you don't know much about the Dead Sea, Rahav is more than ready to tell you all about the attributes of what he calls the "healthiest place on the planet:"

It has the highest percentage of oxygen in the world because it's the lowest spot on the globe (it's 1,440 feet below sea level).

It has the lowest percentage of solar radiation in the world, a feature that makes it ideal for curing skin diseases such as psoriasis.

It has the world's highest percentage of minerals in its air, mud, and water.

It has no air pollution, so the shining stars are visible in the sky every night.

Set in a biblical environment, the Dead Sea offers the supreme serenity of a desert, making it a place where you can forget all your troubles and channel Mother Nature.

"It's a healing place, and I see it as my responsibility to take care of it," Rahav says. "Once healed, it will have a domino effect and will heal the entire region. It will bring prosperity and, consequently, stability."

In 2023, he sealed his commitment to the project, quitting his job and setting up the Tel Aviv-based nonprofit Dead Sea Guardians. Rahav, also dubbed



The Dead Sea



Rahav giving a tour

the Shepherd of the Dead Sea, works with a staff of four, a board of 10, and a few volunteers and advisers. The foundation is financed by private donations, and Rahav spends a good deal of his time fundraising.

In 2023, Dead Sea Guardians established a coalition of nonprofits, including EcoPeace, the Arava Institute for Environmental Studies, EcoOcean, Zalul, the Negev Desert-focused Sustainable Desert, and the crowd-funded legal organization Lobby 99, to join forces for the rehabilitation of the Jordan River and the Dead Sea.

Rahav's vision, which he admits some would see as outrageously grandiose, goes far beyond the shores of the Dead Sea. He believes this mission needs a holistic approach, as well as collaboration with partners and donors if it is to succeed.

Rahav has a very pragmatic perspective. He sees economics as the main driver, alongside adopting new methodologies, technologies, and ways of doing things.

For example, he sees a thriving business and education center and healing hub that will bring jobs and more visitors to the area and an alliance of U.S. companies that, if granted tax breaks, will join the cause.

"We are a machine that creates hope, which is so scarce today," he says. "One candle can chase away the darkness."

In addition to the Dead Sea swim, which earned him a spot on the World Open Water Swimming Association's 2017 list of the World's 50 Most Adventurous Open Water Men, Rahav has participated in a number of other water-based events. He swam the 2017 Pan-American Colibri Swim from the United States to Mexico to raise money for the Colibri Center for Human Rights in the Pacific Ocean and was a participant in the Great Shark Swim, a 62-mile event held along South Africa's KwaZulu-Natal coast to raise awareness about the overhunting of these fish.

It's only natural, Rahav says, for humans to feel an affinity for the water.

"Our bodies, after all, are 75 percent water," he remarks. "So, we're all the same—we are all connected by water. Being in the water changes your mindset and makes you see your responsibility to nature and others around you. You can start out swimming one mile, and lo and behold, you will cross the ocean."

When Rahav dives into the waves,

he gets a physical and psychological boost.

“As a guest in the water, you move to another dimension,” he says. “You have to be humble, and only then will you understand this thing called life. You start asking yourself, ‘What is my duty?’ and ‘How can I take responsibility for nature, which, for the first time in history, depends on humans for help?’”

Although he has always been athletic—in his early life, he was devoted to karate and the martial arts—he didn’t embrace swimming until later on.

“I used to jump in the pool and splash around for fun,” he says. “But I didn’t start swimming until I injured my hamstring. I’m not the type of person to rest, which is what the doctor told me to do. So when he suggested swimming, I started with 10 minutes and worked my way up.”

He was hooked because no matter how long he is in the water—it could be 10 minutes or 10 hours—he can clear his mind. These days, Rahav visits the Dead Sea every other week. The trip, by car, takes two hours each way.

“Whenever I go to the baptizing site at the Jordan River, north of the sea, I get so emotional,” he says, “because you experience firsthand the relationship and the contract signed between us humans and the planet.”

Rahav’s days and nights are filled with meetings. This morning, it’s a conversation with an art curator to create Dead Sea exhibits, and then talks with the chief technology officer of a large U.S. corporation about supporting the foundation, and immediately after that one, a meeting with a European diplomat. And so on and so on.

“I’m working endlessly to save this sea, knowing that it will affect the well-being and the livelihood of millions of people around the world,” he says with confidence. “Now, more than ever, this region and all of humanity need healing. I’m pushing forward a ‘Marshall Plan’ following the events in the Middle East. Good shall prevail.”

Rahav is fully aware that the Dead Sea Guardians project, which is the subject of a documentary of the same name that’s playing in film festivals around the world, is a lifetime mission, one that he’s more than happy to take on.

“Saving the sea is a grandiose project, but we—and by we, I mean humanity—don’t have time for small projects,” he says. “I’m taking things one step at a time. I’m working endlessly 25/7 to get the Dead Sea ready for the next 50 and 100 years so all people can live happily ever after.”

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For more information, please visit deadseaguardsians.org