

Manmade Oasis for Nature and Humans: Wadi El Rayan Protected Area

Global region

North Africa/Arab region

Domestic region

Fayoum Governorate, Egypt

Internationally Designated Areas

Wadi Al-Hitan (Whale Valley) World Heritage Site

2005

Wadi El Rayan Protected Area Ramsar Wetland

2012

In the heart of Egypt's arid desert, Wadi El Rayan is an oasis of water and life. The desert southwest of Fayoum was made to bloom in 1973 after excess agricultural drainage was diverted into a barren depression. Two vast artificial lakes emerged, reshaping the land as teeming wetlands and scenic waterscapes of stunning beauty.

The wetlands at Wadi El Rayan now provide sanctuary to wintering birds such as the near-threatened ferruginous duck and pallid harrier, while the slender-horned gazelle roams the desert edges. From tilapia and mullet to eagles and falcons, around 164 bird species, 24 mammals, 14 reptiles, 38 plants, and 29 types of fish have been recorded here.

Emergent habitats and livelihoods

Alongside flocks of migratory birds, human visitors are also lured by the natural springs that sparkle on the western shore, framed by limestone cliffs and sweeping dunes. The iconic Wadi El Rayan Waterfalls, the largest in Egypt, tumble between the upper and lower lakes, providing a rare spectacle in this desert region.

The lakes also support livelihoods. Fish catches have risen dramatically for 12,000 people who live here, adding to the income provided by agriculture. With nature-based tourism also flourishing, Wadi El Rayan has become a destination where local communities benefit directly from the desert's transformation.

International protection and recognition

First made a protected area in 1989, the emergent and distinctive wetland at Wadi El Rayan was honoured as a Ramsar Wetland of International Importance in 2012 for its extraordinary biodiversity amidst a stunning desert landscape.

This designation followed the 2005 designation of Wadi Al-Hitan (Whale Valley) as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. This site, overlapping with the Ramsar Site, preserves extraordinary remains of ancient whales, frozen in time—hind limbs still visible—as they evolved from land mammals into marine creatures.

Sharing benefits through wise usage

As Wadi El Rayan grows in popularity for leisure, health, and wellness tourism, its fragile wetlands are protected by limiting tourism to designated zones and ensuring that visitors maintain the pristine condition of the wetlands. At Whale Valley, strict rules restrict vehicles and channel visitors along marked trails, balancing visitor satisfaction with long-term preservation.

This emerging MIDA is showing how locals can balance conservation with ecotourism to ensure that Wadi El Rayan is forever a wetland oasis. Despite being manmade, it has become a sanctuary for biodiversity and a haven for leisure.