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## **FAYOUM OASIS BETWEEN PROBLEMS AND POTENTIALS: TOWARDS ENHANCING ECOTOURISM IN EGYPT**

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Ecotourism though in comparison to other types of tourism, it is a small but rapidly growing movement. It is in the core of the tourism development strategy in Egypt and there is considerable effort to promote such type of tourism. Fayoum oasis is foreseen to be one of the major destination for ecotourism not only in Egypt but also worldwide. It is one of the most wonderful areas in Egypt, which contains much potential for ecotourism, as it is rich in natural resources and interesting history. It contains three major protected areas; Qaroun Lake, El-Rayan Valley and Whale Valley protectorates. The last one was designated as a UNISCO World Heritage Site owing to the important 40 millions year-old whale skeletons found there. Although the uniqueness of Fayoum, it does not occupy a significant position on the touristic map of Egypt. This paper is an attempt to highlight the major potentials in the Fayoum oasis as well as the problems and obstacles that preclude its development. It analyzes the factors that lead to the declining of the tourism industry in the oasis and proposes a vision for developing the oasis to be one of the major destinations of ecotourism in Egypt as well as worldwide.

**Keywords:** Ecotourism, protectorates, tourism development strategy, Fayoum Oasis, Egypt.

### **1-INTRODUCTION**

Ecotourism is a form of tourism that involves visiting natural areas in the remote wilderness or urban environments in a responsible travel manner that conserves the environment and improves the well-being of local people. It is a growing source of revenue for the long-term management



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and care of more than 33,000 protected areas worldwide. It is not just about driving more tourists to these locations. It is about ensuring that visitors travel responsibly, help protect the wildlife they are visiting and contribute to the well-being of local communities (Conservation International, 2011).

Some areas in Egypt are become very famous in the field of ecotourism such as the Red Sea eco-lodges and the Western Oasis of Siwa. Fayoum oasis is also a promising area that has all potentials to be a famous ecotourism area in Egypt. The government has already declared three protected areas in it, as in 1989, Lake Qarun and Wadi El Rayan are declared as protected areas to conserve the unique resources of Fayoum. Now, the two protectorate areas offer a good opportunity to support ecotourism development in Fayoum. Furthermore, one of the unique sites in Fayoum Oasis which is; Whale Valley "Wadi El Hitan" is declared by the UNESCO as a world heritage site in 2005 (Iraqi, 2007). Although the uniqueness of Fayoum, as it combines integration between three environments; desert, coastal and agriculture and the protectorates represents approximately 80% of the total area of Fayoum Governorate, it does not occupy a significant position on the touristic map of Egypt. Fayoum has suffered from a continuous neglect from the government over the past decades, along with a tiny publicity effort exerted for promoting to its potentials which leads to a severe shortage in its tourism facilities and decreases its chance to compete with other touristic destinations in Egypt.

This paper principally attempts to highlight the major potentials in the Fayoum oasis as well as the constraints that hinder its progress to occupy a distinguishable position on the Ecotourism map of Egypt. The paper consists of five parts; part one is an introduction, part two includes ecotourism definition, principles and significances, part three illustrates the development of ecotourism in Egypt, part four analyzes reviews the evolution of the tourism development plans of the Fayoum Oasis and part five includes the concluding remarks.

**2- Ecotourism Definition, Principles and significances:**

Nowadays, many terms emerge to describe types of unconventional tourism, such as "Eco-Tourism", "Adventure Travel", "Sustainable Tourism", "Responsible Tourism", "Nature Based



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Travel", "Green Travel", "Multi-Sport Adventures" and "Cultural Tourism" (Baud-Bovy & Lawson, 1998). Ecotourism is the focus of this paper.

Ecotourism can be defined as: "Responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the well-being of local people" (TIES, 1990). Ecotourism is about uniting conservation, communities, and sustainable travel. This means that those who implement and participate in ecotourism activities should follow the following ecotourism principles:

- a- Minimize impact.
- b- Build environmental and cultural awareness and respect.
- c- Provide positive experiences for both visitors and hosts.
- d- Provide direct financial benefits for conservation.
- e- Provide financial benefits and empowerment for local people.
- f- Raise sensitivity to host countries' political, environmental, and social climate.

Thus ecotourism appeared in the world to solve the problems that happened from tourism or tourists' activities, also this was an act after understanding what is meant by the carrying capacity<sup>1</sup> of the environment which was the gate to understand the need of more environmental tourism that respect environment without exceeds its carrying capacity.

### **3-Development of Ecotourism in Egypt**

The tourism development strategy by the Egyptian Ministry of Tourism sets a basic concern on environmental aspects. This strategy provides an important consideration that is given to the protection of the unique heritage of Egypt beside the protection of the resources of ecotourism. Tourism development priorities include the Egyptian Coast of the Gulf of Aqaba, the zone from Hurghada to Safaga on the Red Sea, Nile Cruises from Sohag to Aswan, and Yachting Tourism (Wahab, 1997; Eraqi, 2007), without much emphasis on oases though their high potentials to play a significant role in fostering Ecotourism development in Egypt.

#### **3-1Fayoum Oasis; a Promising Ecotourism Destination in Egypt**

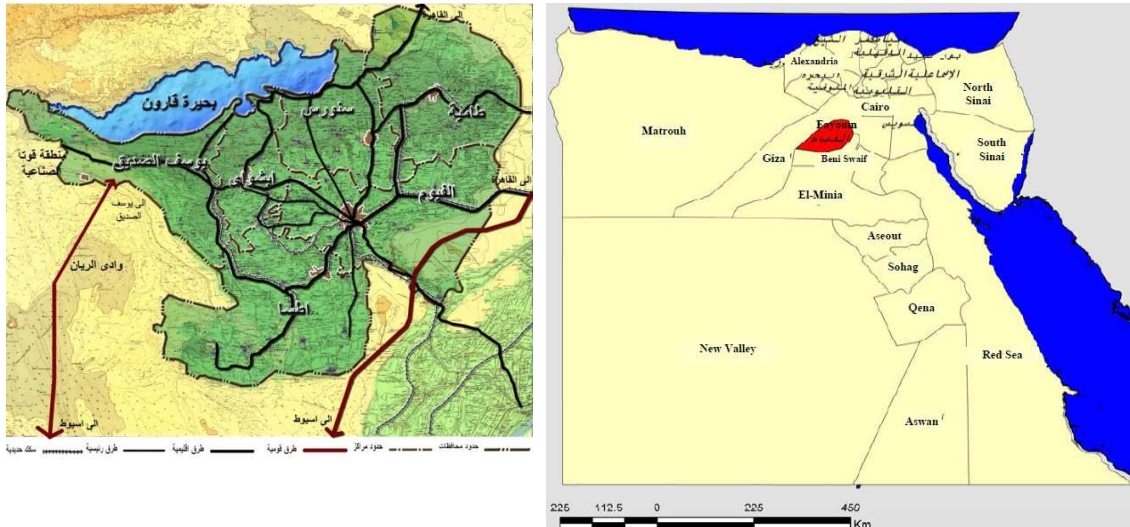
<sup>1</sup>Carrying capacity is a measure of the maximum extent to which a particular location or resources can be used without detriment to its image and sustainability (Insskeep, 1991).



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Fayoum Oasis is located in the heart of Egypt, between the Nile Delta and Upper Egypt, as shown in (Figure 1). It is located South-west of Cairo and about one hundred kilometers from it.



**Figure 1: Fayoum Oasis location and map. (EEAA, 2008)**

Fayoum benefits significantly from its nearby location to Cairo and its easy access along several well paved highways for local and international tourists. Day trips for local expatriates and Egyptians are a mere 45-60 minute travel time while the largenumbers of international tourists arriving from Cairo’s international airport can travelconveniently en route from the Giza pyramids plateau. An additional air route that is under consideration is the KomOshim military air base. There is intent from the government of Egypt to allow public airlines to use thismilitary air base when the numbers of tourist reach the critical mass of economicoperation. This decision will enhance the accessibility of Fayoumas a future active destination.

**3-2 Diversity of Resources/ Attractions (Potentials) in Fayoum Oasis:**

The diversity of Fayoum’s ecosystems provides huge potential for combining differenttypes of tourism products in the same area. A unique blend of climate and geologycreate a fascinating landscape in this desert region where the sandy desert, lushgreen oasis and lakes of Fayoum meet. FayoumOasis contains three protected areas; one of them declared as a UNESCO World Heritage Site (EEAA, 2004). These protected areas are as follows:

**Qaroun Lake;**



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It is 20 km from Fayoum, 80 km from Cairo. The lake is considered one of the most important ancient natural lakes. It is the remaining part of the ancient Moeris Lake. It comprises 1155 km<sup>2</sup>. It is five meters depth in east, thirteen meters in west. It is ideal for practicing water sports, fishing and bird watching. The best period for fishing is from July to September (EEAA, 2004; EEAA, 2007). The lake was declared as one of the protected areas in 1989 with a view to protect the area's biological, archaeological, and geological diversity. It is rich with various kinds of fish, in addition to many charming species of mammals, reptiles and birds (88 species of birds gracefully flying around their nests nearby the lake). Besides many archaeological and geological formations obtained from the rare fossils the area contains. Figure 2 shows a view of the lake, (MSAD &Fayoum Governorate, 2008).



**Figure 2:Qaroun Lake. (Fayoum Governorate, 2008)**

***Wadi El-Rayan;***

Wadi El-Rayan is a natural depression in the western desert of Egypt, 42m below the sea level. It consists of two lakes connected by Egypt's only waterfall. It was designated as a Protected Area in 1989 to protect the area's biological, geological and cultural resources. The Protected Area covers 1759 km<sup>2</sup> in the southern part of El-Fayoum.



**Figure 3:Wadi El-Rayan. (Fayoum Governorate, 2008)**

Furthermore, the area conserves large expanses of desert containing a variety of landscapes and formations. Rare and fascinating wild life is found in the desert of Wadi El- Rayan along with fossils of creatures of past epochs and cultural heritage sites from ancient civilizations. Figure 3shows the water falls in Wadi El Rayan, (MSAD &Fayoum Governorate, 2008).



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***Wadi El-Hitan;***

Wadi El-Hitan is a natural reserve area located in the western desert, about 200 km west of Cairo. The area is of important paleontological interest due to the existence of wide variety of fossilized flora and fauna. In 2005 Wadi El- Hitan was designated as a UNISCO World Heritage Site owing to the important 40 million year-old whale skeletons found there. A fossil remains of the first primitive whales and ancestors of the modern day whales (EEAA, 2007). The ecotourism attractions of the Fayoum Governorate can be divided into three categories: focal, secondary, and supporting attractions.



**Figure 4:Wadi El-Rayan. (Fayoum Governorate, 2008)**

The ***focal attractions*** of the Fayoum Governorate refer to distinctive features of the local and regional natural and cultural heritage; they are the basic assets of Fayoum that the local community can offer to tourists and are attractive enough to motivate a tourist to come to visit. The focal attractions in Fayoum include the following:

- Scientific excursions to the world heritage site of Wadi El-Hitan and fossils of GabalQatrani and petrified forest north Lake Qarun to explore its international significance
- Bird watching around the lakes and in the agriculture lands
- Desert safari activities (mountain climbing and hiking, desert trekking, trails, horse and camel riding, etc.).

The ***secondary attractions*** also refer to the natural and cultural heritage elements, but do not possess the degree of distinctiveness of focal attractions. The secondary attractions in the Fayoum include the following (Saballous, 1997):-

- Wildlife observation (fauna and flora).
- Direct contact with communities’ lifestyles (i.e. the Bedouin, fishermen and farmers).



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- Water sports activities in the lakes (small sailboats, feluccas, kayaking, single-line fishing, and swimming in the lower lake of Wadi El- Rayan).
- Strictly regulating duck hunting in the fishery ponds.
- Tours to the ancient quarries of north Qarun
- Visitation to the archeological sites (Qasr El Sagha, MedinetMadi, Demieh, etc.).

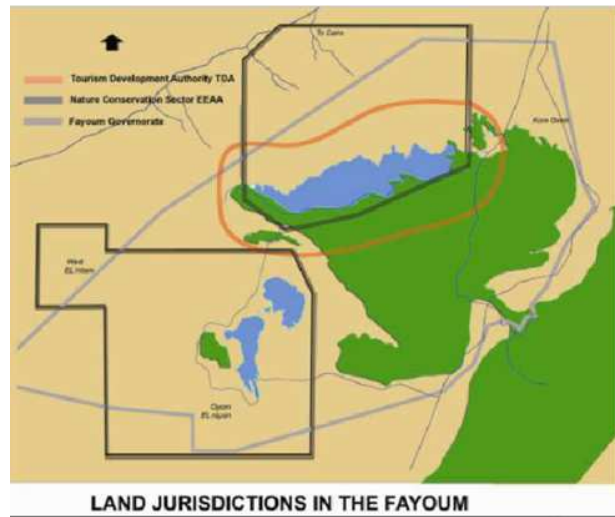
The *supporting attractions* are man-made elements (facilities and services) that serve specific needs of tourists and satisfy practical requirements of eco-tourists. The existing tourism facilities include local handicrafts, existing accommodation facilities in the southern shoreline of Lake Qarun such as Auberge, Panorama and New Panorama hotel, Zad El Mosafer lodge in Tunis, and Safari Camp in Wadi El Rayan.

**3-3 Problems of developing the Fayoum Oasis**

The main problems that hinder the development of Ecotourism in Fayoum oasis can be summarized as follows:

**Landownership confliction:**

The existing land ownership and authority of the shorelines of Lake Qarun and Wadi El Rayan Lakes in the Fayoum governorate are shared among several government jurisdictions and governed by different laws, Ministerial and Prime Ministerial decrees (see the map named land jurisdictions in Figure (5). Coordination between the



**Figure 5: land jurisdictions. (El Khatib, 2006)**

mentioned authorities is almost absent; consequently conflict of interest is a normal result.

**Water Pollution:**

Water pollution by agriculture land drainage and sewage drainage in Lake Qarun can cause irreparable damage to the lake’s ecosystem. Agriculture drainage water reaching Lake Qarun and



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Wadi El Rayan is loaded with chemical pollutants. Huge quantities of chemical fertilizers and pesticides and some industrial chemicals end up in the agricultural drainage system and eventually in Fayoum's lakes. Environmental pollution of the lakes, however, may possibly have contributed to the gradual decline in the fisheries, at least in Lake Qarun. In addition, this pollution greatly impedes the use of the lake for water sports or swimming and reduces the chances of success for tourism development of the southern shore of Lake Qarun (EEAA, 2007). Although, the eastern and western tips of Lake Qarun are specially designated as core zones of the bird sanctuary, tourism facilities and other buildings have been constructed directly on the shore line of the lake within the declared buffer zone. The construction work, site clearing, on-site wastewater and solid waste disposal, noise, obstruction of view to the lake causes a lot of damage to the bird habitats (El Khatib, 2007).

#### **Fossil and Heritage Sites excavation**

There are literally tens of Pharaonic, Greek/Roman, Coptic and Islamic heritage sites as well as fossils and prehistoric remains located throughout Fayoum. Many unexplored ruins from Pharaonic, Greco-Roman and Christian eras, especially in the parts of north Lake Qarun and Oyun El-Rayan, are under threat by the illegal excavation by visitors and people from neighboring areas in Fayoum. For example, people come to the Fayoum fossil beds on the weekends and cart away enormous quantity of fossils and prehistoric artifacts. These actions are devastating the area while scientific study is still in progress. All of these sites must be protected and remain undamaged to preserve the historical resources of Fayoum.

#### **Lack of tourism services**

There is a noticeable shortage in the provision of accommodation and services in Fayoum oasis. At the present time, no tourism facilities exist at the northern shore of Lake Qarun or in Wadi El Rayan except the desert safari camp on the lower Lake of Wadi El Rayan. In the last decade, the tourism pattern was depending on the market of secondary housing units for domestic tourists especially from Cairo (Gad-Elrab, 2007).

#### **4-Review on Tourism Development Plans of the Fayoum Oasis:**

Over the last two decades, there are many tourism development plans that were done,





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particularly, by the Tourism Development Authority (TDA) to develop the tourism in the Oasis. The main development plans can be identified as follows:

- "Indicative tourism development plan for Lake Qarun and Wadi El Rayan" prepared by TDA, 1991
- "Horizon of the Development in the Fayoum Governorate" prepared by Cairouniversity, Fayoum branch and FayoumGovenorate, 1998.
- "Ecotourism for sustainable development in the Fayoum Oasis" prepared byTDA and NSCE, 2000.
- Conservation management plan of Wadi El Rayan protected area, preparedby nature conservation sector, EEAA, funded by the Italian Cooperation, 2001.
- “The preparatory phase for ecotourism in Fayoum”. Prepared by FayoumGovernorate in cooperation with North South Consultants Exchange NSCE,funded by the Royal Dutch Embassy in Cairo, 2004.
- “Tourism Development Plan For the northern Coast of Lake Qarun”,prepared by TDA, 2004

In 1991 the TDA prepared the tourism developmentindicative plan for Lake Qarun and Wadi El Rayan areas to utilize the unlimitedtourist potential of the region, and create new tourism activities based onenvironmentally sound regulations to protect the environment of the twoprotectorates. The indicative tourism plan provided a comprehensive list of guidelinesand regulations to control tourism development in Fayoum.

In 1995 a new accord was signed between the TDA and the Fayoum governorateunder the request of the governorate to change number of regulation items of theindicative plan to help the governorate to attract more investors. These changesincluded:

- Reduction of the buffer zone and the setback line of the southern shore ofLake Qarun on the bird habitat zones to 30 meters instead of 250 meters.
- Permission for limited number of motor boats in lake Qarun (10 boats) in acertain period out of the season of bird migration. These modifications caused a conflict with the protection status of Lake Qarun. Thetourism activities in the southern shore of the Lake caused a lot of



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damage to the birdhabitats especially in the eastern part of the lake which include the critical habitats forwater birds.

In 2000, the Egyptian Tourism Development Authority and the Royal NetherlandsEmbassy commissioned a study on the potential benefits of ecotourism in creating jobs and arresting environmental degradation in Fayoum. The study showed that thepotential for community, nature and culture based ecotourism in Fayoum. Yet, thetype of tourism that Fayoum currently receives is not fulfilling this potential and theeconomic benefits of tourism are minimal for the local population and thegovernorate.

In 2001, the nature conservation sector prepared the conservation management planof Wadi El Rayan protected area. The project was funded by the Italian cooperationand technical assistant provided from the IUCN (The World Conservation Union).The management plan defined the key resources and habitats of the Wadi El RayanProtected area and categorized them into sub zones. Accordingly, themanagement plan identified the acceptable uses and activities within these managementsub-zones.

In 2004, the Fayoum Governorate in cooperation with North South ConsultantsExchange (NSCE) carried out a preparatory phase for ecotourism in Fayoum. Theproject was funded by the Royal Dutch Embassy in Cairo and implemented byNSCE. The project aimed to test a number of ecotourism activities and promote anumber of micro enterprises for local people in addition to implementing trainingcourses for the local target groups.

In 2004, the TDA prepared a Tourism Development Plan for the northern coast of Lake Qarun in order to realize the development potential of this area, as shown in figure (6). The plan aimed to create new growth centers and new investment opportunities. The primary types of tourism development encouraged for the plan were lake front resorts and “tourist villages.” The development plan of the northern coast of Lake Qarunhas defined three Tourism Development Centers (TDCs); the first in the west, the second in the middle and the third in the east. The total carrying capacity of these centers is 2850 hotel rooms, and 4200 tourist housing units (villas, chalets, and apartments as secondary housing units). The target total investment will reach 4



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billion pounds. The main target was poverty alleviation and job creation for the local people, with about 40000 direct and indirect job opportunity.

In 2005, the nature conservation sector in cooperation with the National Commission of UNESCO prepared the nomination profile of Wadi El Hitan and submitted to the international heritage center of UNESCO to nominate Wadi El Hitan as an World Heritage Site (WHS).



**Figure 6: the proposed tourism development centers on the northern coast of LakeQaroun. (El Khatib, 2006)**

In Durban, South Africa 2005, UNESCO declared Wadi El Hitan as WHS and also proposed Gebel Qatrani as a potential site for WHS. This designation of Wadi El Hitan and recognition of Gebel Qatrani by UNESCO is an opportunity for responsible and sustainable ecological renewal of Fayoum (El Khatib, 2006).

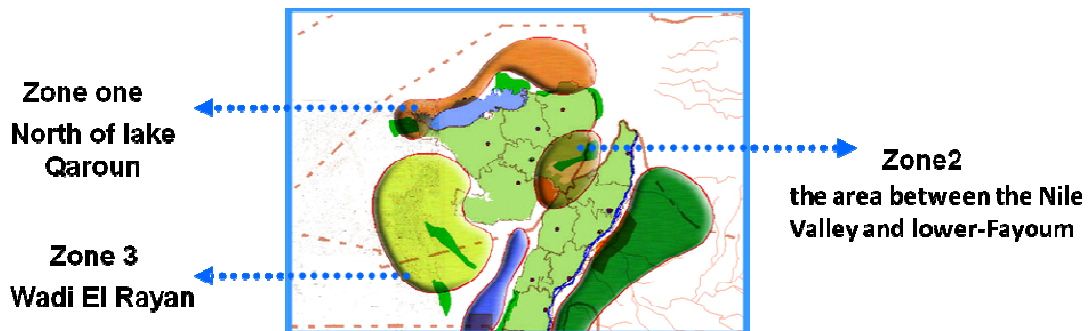


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In 2005 the GOPP has proposed a comprehensive development plan to direct the urban growth of the Northern governorates of Upper Egypt. Fayoum oasis was central in such plan, where three zones of development can be determined in the province of Fayoum as follows:

- **Zone 1: the North of Lake Qarun:** It includes the northern shores of Lake Qarun, in addition to the agricultural reclamation areas in the north-east of Qarun Lake. It is characterized by the presence of potential in tourism and services, the reclamation land and industrial components.
- **Zone 2: the area between the Nile Valley and lower-Fayoum:**It includes the site of the new city of Fayoum, in addition to the area of land reclamation in the eastern province. It is characterized by the multiplicity of archaeological sites.
- **Zone 3: Wadi Al-Rayan:** It includes the lower area of Wadi Al-Rayan, in addition to all of the power industry as well as the reclamation land in Wadi Al-Rayan. It is characterized by its potential of the activities of eco-tourism, industrial activities and land reclamation, figure (7) shows the three development zones. (GOPP, 2005)



**Figure 7: the three zones of development in Fayoum. (GOPP, 2005)**

Though the several attempts to develop a number of Tourism Development Plans of the Fayoum Oasis, very few of the above mentioned plans and its suggested approaches have been implemented. Issues of the regional economic crisis, conflicts between relevant authorities, lack of financial resources, environmental deterioration, language barriers, and availability of documents, local awareness and lack of specificity can be seen as some of the reasons for the difficulty and inability of implementation.



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### **5-Analysis of Fayoum Current Ecotourism Development Plan:**

The Ecotourism for Sustainable Development in the Fayoum Governorate has been initiated to develop ecotourism in Fayoum based on the sustainable development of its natural, cultural and human resources in order to contribute to the poverty alleviation of the Governorate. The Project aims to preserve and increase the value of the environmental and cultural heritage of Fayoum while promoting the area as an attractive destination for local and international visitors. The proposed Ecotourism activities focus on sustainable tourism development in the Fayoum Governorate and will contribute to the national efforts in promoting ecotourism and diversification of the existing tourism product of Egypt.

#### **The Vision**

Make Fayoum a world class ecotourism destination by 2025 by promoting it as a dynamic and competitive destination based on its unique resources as international attractions.

#### **Planning Objectives**

The following are the main planning objectives of the ecotourism plan:

- Designing and establishing a database system for the Fayoum ecotourism resources that will serve as a reliable statistical database,enable the planning of growth and marketing strategies and provide touristswith accurate data for their itinerary planning.
- Define policy and implementation strategies for new destinations with anemphasis on poverty reduction issues.
- Identify destinations areas within Fayoum and their management,particularly the attractions that are presented to the visitor.
- Define how sustainable forms of tourism can create higher levels ofincome in Fayoum.
- Define the nature of the visitor’s experience foreseeable in Fayoum, ingeneral and for various destinations in particular (El Khatib, 2006).

#### **Identification of Stakeholders:**

Main stakeholders who should be involved includes the following; Local communities, Local, national and international businesses, Travel and tour organizations, Businesses organizations, Governmental agencies, Local government organizations, Central government organizations,



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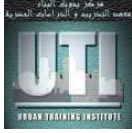
Bilateral and international agencies and donors, Tourists and visitors, Universities and educational institutions, Civil society and NGOs, and Media.

### **6- Concluding Remarks:**

Exploring the potentials exist in the Fayoum Oasis, particularly the diversity of its resources/attractions and the splendid mixture of its three natural environments; desert, coastal and agricultural land indicated that Fayoum oasis should occupy a distinguishable position on Egypt Ecotourism map. Several attempts to develop a number of Tourism Development Plans of the Fayoum Oasis has been initiated, however, very few of these plans and its suggested approaches have been implemented. Conflicts between relevant authorities, lack of financial resources, environmental deterioration, language barriers, and availability of documents, local awareness and lack of specificity can be seen as some of the reasons for the difficulty and inability of implementation.

Exploring the recent Tourism Development Plan of the Fayoum Oasis shows a number of defects; One of the major defects in this plan is focusing mainly on the tourism activity and the tour that the tourist may take in the oasis to spend a day trip or a stay exploring ecotourism activity, without thinking in other parts of the city or the oasis. Some reports refers to Fayoum as one of the poorest areas in Egypt, the number of unemployment is so high, beside many other infrastructure problems and urban problems in the area. Furthermore, the Tourism Development Plan came without any integration with the current effort that done by the GOPP that already developed a master plan for the urban development of the whole governorate. Thus, the recommendations that came out in the Master Plan were not similar to the ones in the Tourism Development Plan that done by the TDA.

The ecotourism zoning plan for the Fayoum Governorate must be a positive model for an ecologically sustainable and unique example of combining environment, local people, and development. Given the sensitive ecosystem of Fayoum, there is an opportunity and an obligation to create a showcase of sustainability and build a development pattern that is socially and economically viable within a framework of strict environmental control. This will include



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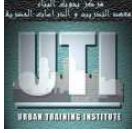
different grades of development and preservation programs to comply with its ecological sensitivity.

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