



Press release

July 29th, 2024

REEF Encounters 2024 and Awards: An edition embracing diversity over uniformity.

Nearly 3,000 people from all over Lebanon took part in REEF Encounters in Kobayat from July 26 to 28. This sixth edition focused on human and biodiversity and was especially marked by the premiere screening of eight Lebanese short films from the new “Biodiversity and Cinema” program, which were acclaimed by the audience. This unprecedented initiative brought together 22 filmmakers and ecologists who worked together to create and produce films on Lebanese biodiversity .

For the second year in a row, the REEF Ambassadors Program brought together young people aged 12 to 17, who followed a tailor-made program (information sessions on biodiversity and biomimicry, screenings, introduction to film criticism...) and took part in the Encounters' activities. Speaking at the closing session, the group stated that “the activities have had a positive impact on our way of thinking, our knowledge and our culture”. REEF Encounters also shed light on the ongoing attacks against Southern Lebanon and the genocide and ecocide in Palestine through a major talk, films that addressed these issues, and a concert by Palestinian singer and musician Salwa Jaradat. Emotion and communion with the audience marked the musical evening. Jaradat paid tribute to southern Lebanon and to the Palestinian composers of the 1930s who were exiled to Lebanon, Iraq and Egypt and left their mark on the repertoire of these countries.

REEF'S FILMS AWARDS

Eight international films competed in the international short-film competition, which has been organized annually by REEF since 2019. The eight films from the “Biodiversity & Cinema program” were also part of this year’s competition. All these films were assessed by three panels: a jury of filmmakers and environmentalists, the REEF ambassadors and the audience.

This year’s professional jury included Soleil Gharbieh, Grant Manager at the Arab Fund for Arts and Culture (AFAC); Michelle Kesserwany, filmmaker; Betty Taoutel, actress, author, and director; Marc Beyrouiti, agricultural engineer; and Carlos Naffah, university professor and multidisciplinary consultant in public policy and infrastructure development.

The "Biodiversity & Cinema" section

The professional jury expressed its admiration for "the cooperative work between the directors, producers, and environmentalists, and their keenness to complete the projects in a very short time and within a very limited budget." Sponsored by the Organisation internationale de la Francophonie (OIF), the jury's award went to "The Tree of Hell" by Raed Zeno among the 8 films produced within the "Biodiversity & Cinema" program. They stated, "The choice of the invasive tree is a perfect one to show the parallel between nature and settlement policies. How this tree invades the endemic species reminds us of occupation and colonialism. Personal issues are well integrated with public issues." According to Raed Zeno: "Environmental and political issues cannot be separated, since the climate changes we are witnessing are the result of human policies. The movie dealt with the topic of invasion and occupation and mixed the military aspect, represented by the Israeli occupation, with the environmental aspect, represented by the tree's invasion of biodiversity. Both threaten the environment and human diversity in the Levant, including Lebanon."

The jury also gave a special mention to "Horizon," a movie by Moussa Shabandar and Shérine Raffoul, stating that "It conveys a positive environmental message, because fanaticism in this case can be dangerous. The transformation of the main character, who is not ashamed of his past practices in terms of massacring birds, is very positive."

International short-films section

The professional jury's prize was awarded to "Manity" by Hussen Ibraheem. The film resonated with the personal experiences of many men in Lebanon, including jury member Carlos Naffah, who, in their childhood, were forced to prove their masculinity through hunting. According to Hussen Ibraheem: "Manity reflects the end of the Lebanese civil war in the early '90s. For many, the abrupt end brought no real assurance of peace. The memories of the war had to be buried, and the anger and rage that had built up had to be directed somewhere else, often shaping the way children were raised to be strong and able to fight. My generation continues to witness the effects of war - power struggles, greed, and a fascination with weapons still drag our country down. I thank REEF and its jury for recognizing our work. This award encourages us to keep telling these important stories. "

A special mention was given to the Chinese film "Xiaohui he ta de niu" by Xinying Lao for its subtle depiction of the relationship between mother and son. From the child's perspective, the film portrayed his personal struggle with separation from his parents, nature, and the cow.

The REEF's Ambassador Award was sponsored by The British Council and was presented to "The Revenge of Nature" by Kim Elias Majdalani. The film depicts how nature reclaims its territory through ecological succession at an abandoned Lebanese train station. The ambassadors praised the film for accurately showcasing species that are part of Lebanon's biodiversity in a beautiful setting. Many were also moved by Raed Zeno's film and appreciated the parallel drawn between Israeli settlements and occupation and the invasive tree.

The audience award was given to "The Tree of Hell" confirming the evocative power of Raed Zeno's work.

REEF'S HIGHLIGHTS AND KEY FIGURES

- Nearly 3000 persons took part in REEF encounters 2024
- 16 youths from Akkar and Beirut took part in the REEF's ambassador's program
- 21 films were screened over the 3 days
- 200+ people took part in the talk on "Threatened Human & Bio – diversity; South Lebanon as a Living Example"
- 270+ people participated in three narrative hikes in major natural sites of Akkar, focusing on plants, trees, birds, and reptiles, with the guidance of biodiversity experts and a storyteller. One of these hikes was led by the 2023 REEF Ambassadors.
- 40+ people discovered the stories and landmarks of Kobayat with a local guide.
- 27 people attended a workshop with designer Rytta Couture to learn about the basics of upcycling used fabrics and garments, paving the way for potential economic activities.
- 10 people participated in a workshop on potatoes to explore how to transform this abundantly cultivated ingredient in Akkar into an additional source of income.
- 600+ persons participated in the 3 rural dinners, titled "From the Heart" and meant to highlight the culinary traditions passed down by Akkari women.
- A photo exhibition by the French Institute featured 25 emblematic photographs of Lebanon's endemic species and natural ecosystems.
- The exhibition produced by the Lakes International Comic Art Festival (LICAF) and the British Council - MENA "From Ink to Action: Using Comic Art to Save the Planet" has enabled funds for the renovation of the Kobayat watchtower to prevent forest fires from propagating.