

Preserve Petra and Bedouin rights in Jordan

Petra, an archaeological site in Jordan, is home to multiple Bedouin tribes, including the Bdoul and the Ammarin, who have lived there for centuries (1). Since Petra's designation as a UNESCO World Heritage site in 1985 (2), Jordan has neglected the rights of these local communities to hold their land and preserve their Indigenous knowledge. Environmental protections should not displace local communities. Instead, conservationists should work with local communities to address the challenges posed by climate change.

After the World Heritage designation, Petra authorities took steps to relocate all Bedouin tribes living in Petra to protect the site from environmental damage (3, 4). However, there was no evidence that the community was a threat to the site (5), and displacing them disconnected them from their cultural heritage and disrupted their livelihoods and nomadic lifestyle (6, 7). In December 2023 and early 2024, the Jordanian Government took even more extreme action, removing nearly all Bedouin tourist stalls, owned by members of the Bdoul tribe, from Petra by force (8). In making this decision, the government targeted individuals but took no responsibility for policies that allowed unsustainable tourism.

The decision to further displace and dispossess Bedouin communities highlights the tension between heritage preservation and the rights of Indigenous communities (1, 6). Such conflicts are heightened by claims by climate scientists that local communities have exacerbated climate impacts at Petra (9). However, the commercialization and commodification of Petra as a tourist destination poses risks that are equal or greater than those posed by local tribes (5).

Bedouin tribes have a long history in Petra, and they have valuable environmental knowledge about water management and human-animal interactions in the region (1, 10, 11). Jordan and conservationists should partner with members of the tribes to better understand the impacts of climate change, and all management decisions should include meaningful Bedouin representation (12).

In addition to studying the archaeological integrity of Petra, impact assessment teams—including social scientists—should determine the effects of displacement and dispossession on Bedouin livelihoods, cultural heritage, and wellbeing. Efforts to protect the environment should focus on sustainable tourism practices rather than targeting the Bedouin community. Bedouin tribes are important stakeholders in the future of Petra, and scientists should respect their needs and collaborate with them to incorporate their knowledge into conservation plans.

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