



Building Excellence through Competence-based Qualification

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Case Study. Sharing best practices in helping changemakers build the future.

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OHK's Consulting Partner **Adam Kucharski** leads a module on GIS navigation during the nature guide scholarship winners' probationary period in the Ajloun Forest Reserve.

Building Excellence through Competence-based Qualification

How we helped the Royal Society for the Conservation of Nature develop a world-class National Qualification Scheme for nature guiding and charting Jordan's path into international ecotourism .

- Client:** Royal Society for the Conservation of Nature
- Location:** Jordan
- Services:** Heritage Conservation and Sustainability
Capacity Building and Institutional Development
Place Design

The Situation

An organization facing big changes and asking big questions about core competency and sustainability.

In late 2008, the Royal Society for the Conservation of Nature (RSCN) embarked upon the drafting of an ambitious Transformation Strategy, guided and advised by OHK Consultants. As the Middle East's preeminent conservation organization, it has sought to position itself not only as a champion for Jordan's biodiversity but also to leverage its core competencies as a regional pioneer in the training of professionals in conservation and ecotourism. To this end, the RSCN's innovative Royal Academy for the Conservation of Nature was planned as the regional hub for conservation training, financing itself through one-of-a-kind, qualification-based education offerings.

This same strategic impulse extended to ecotourism, in which the RSCN hoped to grow its current role as a first mover in the industry towards being a regional center of excellence. The Transformation Strategy had proposed entire business units devoted to cultivating innovative ecotourism experiences, ranging from lodge-based and immersive tourism in its reserves to destination management operations that offer guided tours across the Kingdom. The RSCN saw an opportunity to elevate the quality of ecotourism in Jordan, and thus strengthen its ability to support conservation. The challenge faced by the RSCN was to make these transformational initiatives profitable and self-sustaining.

The Academy will require “quick win” offerings to buttress it financially in its formative years. Moreover, ecotourism operations need urgent improvement in the quality of visitor experiences. OHK recognized that for both of these transformational functions, nature guiding was a critical enabling competency. Not only would highly skilled nature guides improve the RSCN's immediate tourism offerings and enable its expansion into more specialized ecotourism, but the training and qualification of nature guides could become a major pillar of the Academy's offerings. Creating a strong nature guiding competency emerged as a powerful early step towards realizing the RSCN's transformational vision.



RSCN staff plan new guided tourism routes across the Ajloun Forest Reserve, piloting experience design techniques developed in South Africa.

The guide qualification system is one of our most innovative and direly needed initiatives. The hardest thing for an organization is to ask if it can do things differently; to ask its people what needs to change. It required courage from all of us, particularly the staff who shared our view that it was time to challenge the status quo. It is the RSCN's ambition to have the Academy change the way we build guiding capacity in our reserves and for the country as a whole. We worked with OHK on our organization's transformation strategy and when it was time to kick start this key initiative, we chose to work with them again because of their unique approach to problem solving and the innovation they bring to bear on our strategy implementation.

—Yehya Khaled



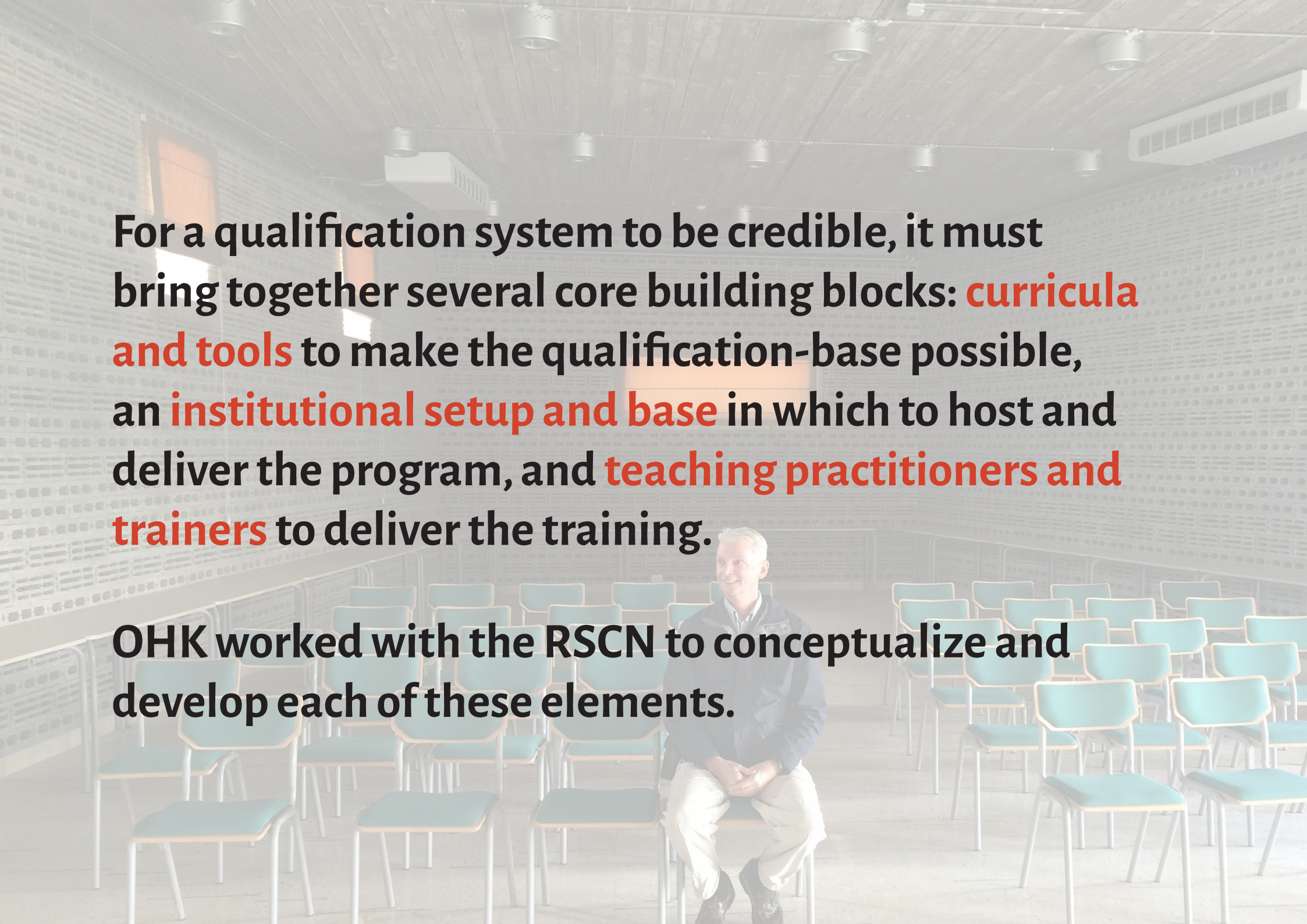
The Challenge

If the necessary competencies don't exist, they must be created—systematically and efficiently.

But how could the RSCN build its nature guiding capacity in time for the Academy opening in just three years, and do so to a world-class standard?

Although the RSCN has offered guided hikes in its reserves since the 1990s, there is no standard for excellence in guiding, no system for training new guides against such a standard, and no notion as to what it takes to be competitive in the international tourism market. Moreover, regional destinations have struggled to grow indigenous guiding competencies, with emerging destinations like the United Arab Emirates relying on nature guides imported from abroad. No similar training or vocational entities within Jordan were able to contribute towards a true qualification-based system that competes internationally, and past initiatives to build capacity were one-off training modules that failed to take the learners out of their environment and expose them to international standards of excellence.

The question remained for the RSCN: how could it rapidly create a cost-effective and marketable training framework that could create a core competence for world-class nature guides?

A man with short grey hair, wearing a dark blue jacket and light-colored trousers, is sitting on a teal chair in a large, empty lecture hall. The room has rows of teal chairs with wooden frames, a wooden ceiling with recessed lights, and a wall with a perforated pattern. The text is overlaid on the image.

For a qualification system to be credible, it must bring together several core building blocks: **curricula and tools** to make the qualification-base possible, an **institutional setup and base** in which to host and deliver the program, and **teaching practitioners and trainers** to deliver the training.

OHK worked with the RSCN to conceptualize and develop each of these elements.

The Solution

Developing a national standard for certification-based qualification

OHK's answer to this question hinged on the notion of “qualification-based” training. Unlike one-off training courses, qualification-based training entails a progression against well-defined competence thresholds within a rigorous and formal curriculum. Moreover, it is outcome-based, and empirically measures students' performance and abilities.

The first step in creating such a framework for the RSCN was a benchmarking exercise to understand where in the world such a training methodology existed, and on what basis the RSCN could model its own qualification system or combine the best elements of several benchmarks. Certain key characteristics were identified as requirements for the training methodology: it must be qualification-oriented, field-based, and focused the guest experience.

One of the few global qualification systems to meet our standards was the curriculum and qualification methodology of the Field Guide Association of South Africa (FGASA). Internationally renowned for the rigor of its curriculum, its strong hospitality focus, and its practical, field-based experience requirements, FGASA represented a valuable mold for the RSCN. Yet there was no doubt that RSCN's ecological context required a “Jordanized” curriculum. The solution was clear: the RSCN would develop a new qualification system, extending and improving upon FGASA's framework but delivered in Jordan as the premier nature guiding qualification in the Middle East and North Africa.

The qualification curriculum that emerged from the analysis was modular, integrating both theoretical and practical course content, led by qualified and certified trainers in an immersive, field-based environment. We envisioned a full year of study for qualification, in which students would learn and be tested on a broad battery of subject areas ranging from foundational ecology to advanced guiding techniques, navigation, lodge management and hospitality, and first aid, among other disciplines. The qualification would likewise require a threshold of guiding hours logged by the students in actual functioning lodges.

The Solution

The Academy as an institutional base and qualifying body

The notion to creating an Academy had been gaining momentum in the RSCN for a number of years. OHK Consultants was charged with ensuring that the Academy would align strategically and operationally to the task of qualifying nature guides across the region. The RSCN was poised to enter a regional education market that had been hitherto untapped. However, critical parts of the equation were missing. How would the Academy be positioned, both regionally and locally, and how could the Academy achieve the critical mass needed to be financially self-sustainable?

OHK responded to this challenge with a business strategy for the Academy that incorporated the positioning of the Academy regionally, as well as its integration within the RSCN's post transformation structure, not only as a training entity, but as a research institute and body for qualification and certification.

While the nature guide qualification offerings could buttress the Academy's operations in its formative early years, we explored the potential of supplementary business dimensions for the Academy - what populations were likely to use the Academy (tourists, trainees, scholars, etc.) and what value propositions the Academy could make for these customers in order to sustain itself financially. This resulted in several extension strategies like offering the qualification to countries elsewhere in the region, standardizing English as the delivery language, and integrating the Academy with other RSCN business units like the successful Wild Jordan café and nature shop.





The Solution

The Academy as a signature building

Historically, the RSCN has stood out from its regional peers not only for its excellence in biodiversity conservation, but also for the groundbreaking design of its facilities. Through a long-term collaboration with Ammar Khammash, one of Jordan's preeminent architects and artists, the RSCN has graced its reserves with offices, lodges, and tourism facilities that reflect the grandeur of Jordan's reserve landscapes. Recognizing that a world-caliber teaching academy would have to compete on the level of facilities just as much as on the level of qualifications, OHK sought to extend this history of design excellence to the Academy. In a strategic review of the RSCN's physical plans for the Academy, we found that its original site had been chosen to optimize the RSCN's available land rather than as a strategic asset for qualification and training.

We advised the RSCN relocate the planned Academy to the Ajloun Forest Reserve to take full advantage of the dramatic setting. In a twist to the RSCN's "design with nature" development model, the Academy was integrated into one of the disused limestone quarries adjacent to the reserve. Furthermore, over the course of its design development, we extensively reviewed the complex's building program, optimizing the 3,255 square meter floor plan towards a commercially-viable space that is fully aligned with the program vision.

The Solution

Teaching practitioner and trainer development

The human element of the program quickly emerged as the lynchpin for success: formally trained and certified trainers would be needed to lead the curriculum content development and deliver the training. We proposed a threefold role for the future trainers. Firstly, they would be certified guides themselves, delivering training and instruction in the Academy. Secondly, they would develop the curriculum, combining their knowledge of Jordan with FGASA's rigorous qualification-based teaching methodology and international-standard guiding theory and practice. Finally, they would actively guide within the RSCN's reserves, elevating the caliber of the visitor experience and keeping their own skills refined.

As before, efficiently building the competence needed to fill such an unprecedented role posed challenges. Trainers brought in from abroad would lack the local knowledge needed to “Jordanize” the curriculum and would be hard for the RSCN to sustain. We determined that the most efficient solution was to send a core RSCN team to South Africa and have them qualify under FGASA's yearlong Field Guide certification as a launching platform for the Jordanian framework. Once qualified, this core team of trainers would return to the RSCN Academy and apply their high-caliber guiding proficiency to their roles as instructors, curriculum developers, and active guides.

We were the first in the region to pilot this idea that you can fund conservation through eco tourism enterprises in reserve areas. But in today's competitive ecotourism market, having nature-based attractions is seldom enough. In our transformation efforts, we realized Jordan lacked guides of international caliber and that there is no vocational entity in the country with the means to qualify them. We are impressed with the processes and tools that OHK developed to overcome this training gap. Not only did they contribute to a structured and effective implementation, but they have started us thinking about how to apply them to other areas in our organization.

—Chris Johnson



The Solution

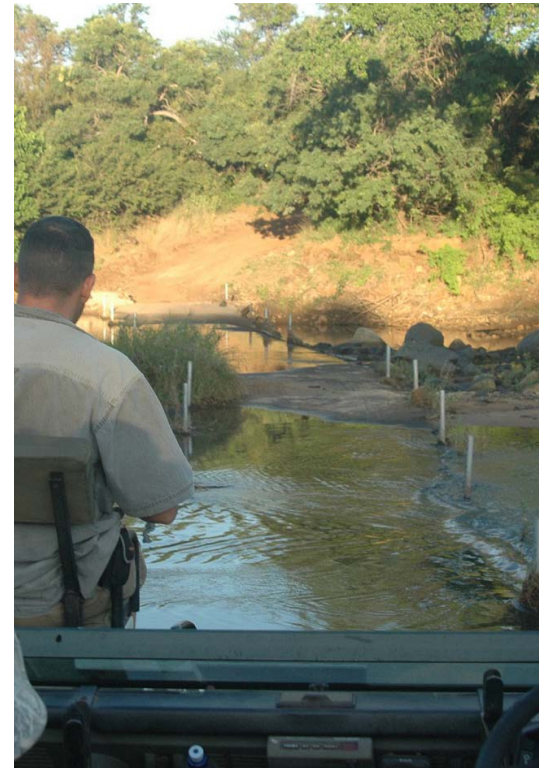
The Nature Guide Training Scholarship

With the solution firmly in hand, the RSCN was faced with the challenge of selecting the team to send to South Africa. The myriad responsibilities of the trainers - guiding, teaching, and curriculum development - would require a skill set not readily available in the RSCN. However, the RSCN lacked a yardstick for selecting candidates according formalized metrics guiding or training expertise. It would prove necessary, then, for the RSCN to create a recruitment process that could find the needed talent and evaluate it against a rigorous and objective set of requirements and capabilities.

OHK developed an innovative scholarship recruitment program to identify candidates with the greatest potential to succeed in South Africa and successfully transition into their role as trainers at the Academy. This process, which was the first of its kind in Jordan, included the following:

- 1 A marketing and outreach plan** designed to attract the broadest possible cross-section of candidates from across Jordan, as well as marketing the scholarship process to potential donors.
- 2 A comprehensive online application** measuring candidates' basic eligibility, language abilities, academic aptitude, and commitment to the training.
- 3 An objective, merit-based evaluation process** including oral interviews, written exams, field assignments, and a month-long probationary period in the RSCN reserves to assess candidates' personalities, drive, research abilities, and fortitude.
- 4 A retention strategy** that ensured the long-term commitment of the scholarship winners through contractual mechanisms and a system for feedback and monitoring during the South African qualification period and beyond.

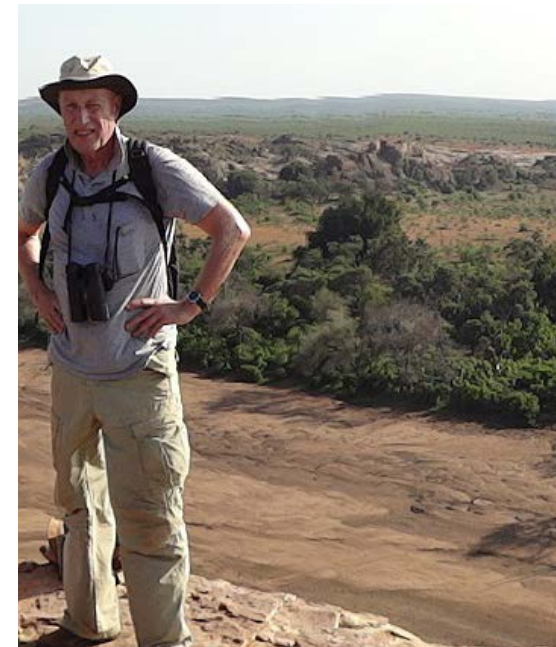
The scholarship recruitment process designed by OHK was the first of its kind in Jordan: an entirely meritocratic application and screening process that integrated a diverse suite of criteria including academic performance, personality, interview results, and ability to perform in functional field and lodge based environments. Through this process, the RSCN was able to select the four most promising candidates from a pool of over 600 applicants nationwide and send them on fully-funded scholarships towards earning FGASA's prestigious Field Guide qualification in South Africa.



The Benefits

How this program has delivered enduring value for the RSCN and for conservation in Jordan

OHK's approach to this program represents a departure from traditional capacity building initiatives. Whereas traditional approaches fail to expose learners to excellence outside of their environments or rely on brief training modules created with little reference to any broader qualification standards, our approach was anchored by a qualification-based framework that enabled formalized and rigorous learning, marketable internationally. By focusing on tools and processes that empowered the RSCN as an organization, we achieved both the creation of a qualification-based nature guiding competency in as well as the institutional strengthening of the RSCN. The RSCN has been empowered by this initiative to address its own internal recruitment procedures and approach the challenge of capacity building, both internally and externally, with powerful tools and processes.

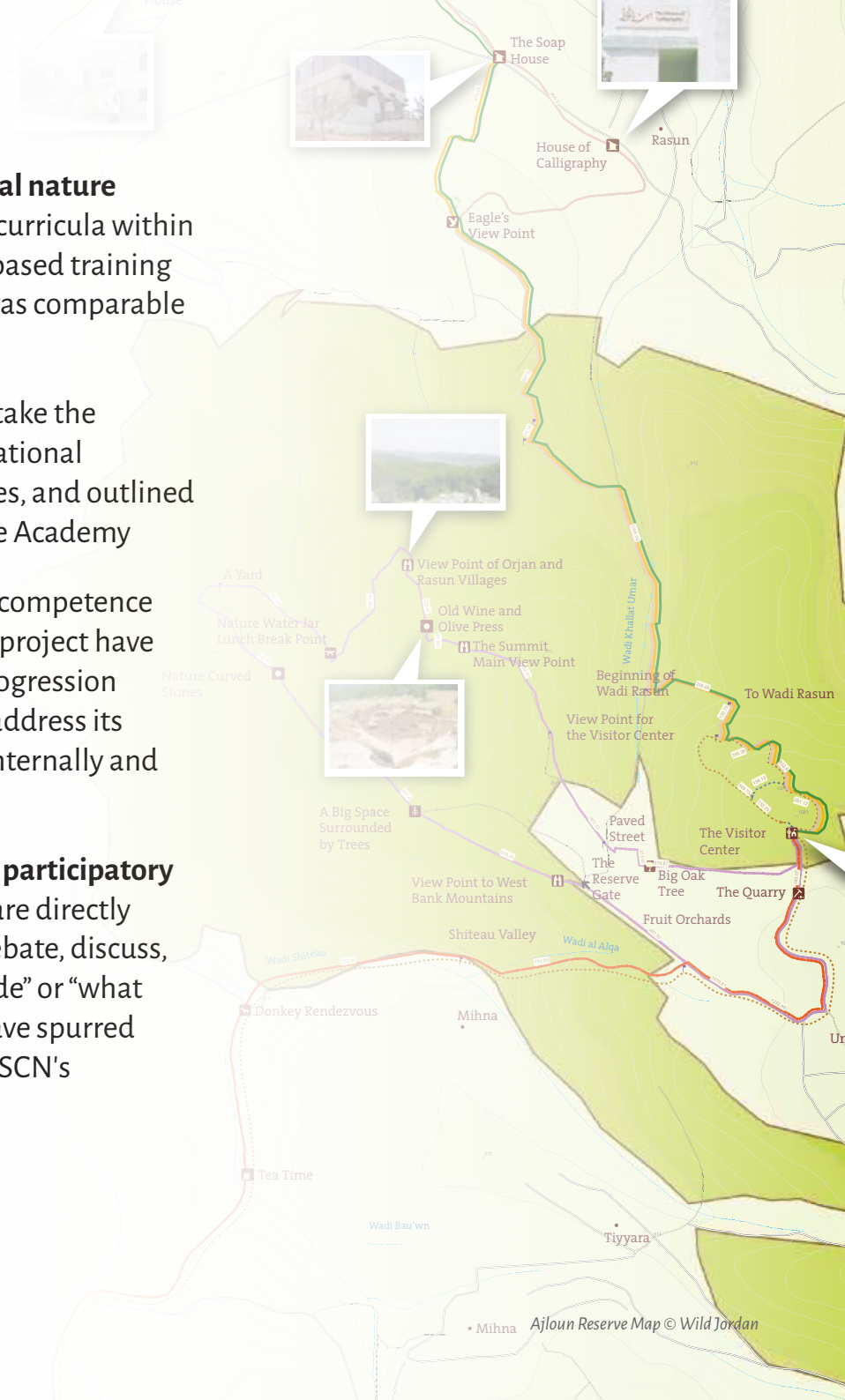


1 Working closely with the RSCN, OHK developed a **strategy for a national nature guide qualification system** that linked people together with tools and curricula within the confines of a custom-created, national body. The resulting qualification-based training framework reflected international best practices in vocational training and was comparable to the world's best in rigor and process.

2 OHK developed an Academy **implementation and growth strategy** to take the Academy from concept all the way to a fully functional and viable educational institution. A stepped approach built key institutional structures, defined roles, and outlined the curricular content and tools needed – in essence, the “moving parts” of the Academy

3 OHK brought forward a **new paradigm for HR**, from talent sourcing to competence evaluation. The processes and tools we provided over the course of this project have empowered the RSCN to think differently about people, talent, and career progression across the organization. The RSCN has been empowered by this initiative to address its own internal recruitment procedures and approach capacity building, both internally and externally, with powerful tools and processes.

4 OHK designed a process that has served as a new, **intra-organizational participatory model for leadership**, wherein key members of the RSCN leadership are directly engaged in recruitment, evaluation, and coordination, coming together to debate, discuss, collaborate, and reach consensus. Questions such as “what makes a good guide” or “what are the most important facts about the Society that a recruit should know” have spurred valuable debate and have contributed to a participatory culture among the RSCN's management and staff.



OHK Consultants is a team of multi-disciplinary strategists and design practitioners that help clients in furthering the sustainable development of communities, economies, cultures, and biomes. We guide the public sector in creating vibrant civic and economic spaces, we help the private sector harness unseen opportunities, and we empower individuals to join the ranks of a global citizenry.

The partners that lead OHK take an entrepreneurial approach to design and strategy; our innovative advisory competes in the global market as well as in the marketplace of ideas. We help governments, institutions, companies, non-profits, and individuals shape physical places, civic places, and marketplaces.



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Mr. Hassan works at the intersection of emerging markets, public policy, and public-private partnerships. He brings two decades of Middle East, Africa, and Asia experience in initiation, growth, and transformation strategies and has been instrumental in providing advice and program management for pioneering growth initiatives in excess of +\$100 B USD from planning and design to finance and execution.



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Mr. Kucharski manages an international portfolio of global business strategy, design, and planning projects. Adam has been involved in the allocation and placement of over \$300 M USD in capital within emerging markets, pioneering and implementing innovative business models across various industries such as tourism, real estate, healthcare, and power utilities. He has been based in a variety of countries across Asia, the Middle East, and Africa.

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