This year Eric Aronoff took 16 MSU students to Israel as part of the environmentally-oriented “Nature, Culture and Environmental Sustainability in a Green Israel” study abroad program; it was his third time leading the program, and the fourth time that it has run.

The program, which ran from June 16th through July 3, focused on environmental challenges and issues in Israel and the innovative projects being undertaken to address them, while also examining ideas of nature, landscape and the environment in Israeli cultural history, and how these shape the ways in which Israelis interact with their environment. The course also highlighted the intersection of environmental and political issues, particularly around transboundary environmental challenges like water resources. The program took students around the entire country, from Eilat in the southern tip of Israel, to Metullah and the Golan Heights on the Lebanese and Syrian borders in the north; in between students stayed at 7 different locations, including Jerusalem, Sde Boker, En Gedi and kibbutzim in the Arava desert. In each location students met with local academics, experts and members of environmental organizations in the field, saw the sites in which they carry out their work, and actively participated in their projects. Throughout, we highlighted the interdisciplinary, transcultural and transnational nature of these environmental issues, as we looked at the way these environmental issues cross political boundaries as well, uniting Israelis and Palestinians in common cause.

This trip built on partnerships that have been forged over the course of the program’s history, revisiting partners and friends at locations like the Tel Hai Environmental College in the northern Galilee, the Biria Forest and the Hula Agamon, Ben Gurion University in Sde Boker, Hebrew University in Jerusalem, and Kibbutz Lotan in the Arava. We also developed new relationships and partners, as the group spent for the first time several days at the Arava Institute for Environmental Studies at Kibbutz Ketura. There students were able to learn about the Institute’s unique innovations and experiments in off-grid and sustainable energy solutions, and the way the Institute brings together students and researchers from a variety of communities – Jewish and Palestinian Israelis, Palestinians, Bedouin, Jordanians – to work on common environmental challenges as a bridge toward mutual understanding and peace-building. At the same time, students were able to learn about and experience the unique social experiment of kibbutz life.

Our partners in the field were uniformly engaging and interesting, and the sites we visited fascinating, eye-opening and often breathtakingly beautiful. The students saw a lot, did a lot, and had a great deal to think about, in terms of conceptions of nature and development, environmental sustainability, politics and history. Each came away with a sense of Israel’s ecological, cultural and political complexity and diversity. This year’s student participants — almost all of whom benefited from the generous Julie and Ed Levy, Jr., Ed and Dot Slade, and Albert and Sharie Gladner Scholarships for study in Israel — were: Aidan Arono[ff, Rachel Brunhild, Jaylynn Buckley, Rachel D’Allo, Craig Hedges, Zane Kemper, Samantha Kinjorski, Abby Laporte, Alyssa Moinet, Lizzie Nagel, Ryan Roehler, Carly Nesbitt, Jacob Seid, Alexis Spector, Connor Storck, and Kaila Waino. 

Pictured on page 6 (top to bottom): students learn from Professor Aronoff about Israeli geography in Tel Chai; students volunteer with other Israeli students on the Galilee Food Forest project; students S. Kinjorski, R. Brunhild, and A. Laporte enjoy Shivta, an ancient Nabatean City; and students volunteer on one of Kibbutz Lotan’s ecological projects.
This year Yael Aronoff took 15 MSU students to Israel as part of the MSU Jewish Studies Summer Program at Hebrew University; it was Professor Aronoff’s fourth time leading the program.

MSU’s Jewish Studies Summer Program at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem offers students the opportunity to earn 8 credits in the arts and humanities or social sciences, while living and studying in Jerusalem. The program, sponsored by Jewish Studies and the College of Arts & Letters, James Madison College, and the College of Social Science, in cooperation with the Rothberg International School at Hebrew University, is designed for students interested in learning about the history, society, and culture of Israel. Students took one course on Israeli cultures, society, and politics with Professor Aronoff, and another on the history of modern Israel with Professor David Mendelsson.

Students met with leading Israeli academics and experts in a variety of fields. They met with scholars doing cutting-edge research on demography in Israel, challenges to Israel as a Jewish democracy, and on maintaining democratic values while fighting asymmetric wars. Students had first-hand exposure to the dynamic character of Israeli politics, as they visited the Knesset and witnessed live, heated debate about UNESCO decisions regarding Jewish heritage sites. They heard from policy-makers like the Foreign Policy Advisor to Yair Lapid, the head of the centrist “Yesh Atid” party in Israel. Students visited with the Peres Center for Peace and heard about their many cultural, medical and business programs designed to foster better understanding and cooperation among Jewish and Palestinian Israelis, as well as Israelis and Palestinians from the West Bank and Gaza. They heard from Yitzhak Frankenthal, founder of the Parents Circle, a group of bereaved Israeli and Palestinian families who have lost family members to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and who use their experiences to combat mutual demonization and promote cultural dialogue. They also visited borders with Syria, Lebanon, and Gaza, and had community members as well as security experts discuss security challenges and defensive measures focused on securing border communities.

One focus of the program was the subcultures within Israel and their influence on society and politics, including Druze, Palestinian, and Jewish Israeli communities. In Jerusalem, the students visited sites central to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, and in Haifa they saw the Bahai Gardens; they traveled to Masada to learning about Jewish resistance against the Roman Empire, and the symbolic significance this site has acquired in modern Israeli political culture. The cultural and religious layers of Israel were perhaps best captured by a visit to an archeological site in Migdal on the Sea of Galilee: there a team of archeologists, led by Arfan Najar, a Muslim Palestinian Israeli, has unearthed a rare, wonderfully preserved first century Jewish synagogue (containing, among other things, perhaps the only known sculpture symbolically depicting the Second Temple, produced by eyewitnesses before its destruction), where it is highly likely Jesus spoke and preached.

All students engaged in original research, making use of resources available in Israel. Most students conducted research on specific Israeli political parties as part of a simulation of Israeli elections. Other students conducted independent research under Professor Aronoff’s guidance on subjects ranging from the changing nature of kibbutzim, to the challenges and opportunities for Bedouin women’s higher education, to a comparative study of PTSD and its treatment in the Israeli and the US militaries, to advocacy of civil marriage in order to also allow for same sex marriage in Israel.

The program was a resounding success. Students commented that they “learned such a vast amount in such a short period” (Graham Wise), and that they would “carry [their] memories and experiences from this educational opportunity forever” (Rozzie Bloch). Several students will study Hebrew in the coming academic year as a result of their experience, and are seriously considering doing graduate work in Israel. Several will present their research at our Jewish Studies Undergraduate Research Conference.

This year’s student participants — almost all of whom benefited from the generous Julie and Ed Levy, Jr., Ed and Dot Slade, and Albert and Sharie Gladner Scholarships for study in Israel — were: Aidan Aronoff, Joe Banish, Rozzie Bloch, Mackenzie Cater, Alex Chudzik, Jesse Keller, Abby Laporte, Carly Nesbitt, Jared Sherman, Jason Sherman, Connor Storck, Yuyao Sun, Kaila Waineo, Xiangyu Wang, and Graham Wise.

Pictured on page 8 (top to bottom): students on top of Masada; students tour the Knesset; students hear from a Palestinian archaeologist at Migdal; and students hear about Druze culture from a Druze community member.