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INFRASTRUCTURE

Ecologists concerned over Suez expansion impacts

In Egypt, dignitaries and regular citizens are celebrating the lavish inauguration of the Suez Canal expansion. But scientists are concerned about its environmental impacts - particularly from invasive species.



In recent days, billboards have appeared along Cairo's congested roads, announcing "An Egyptian project, mesmerizing the world." Huge flags flutter limply from government buildings as television advertisements praise the country's engineering prowess: Egypt inaugurating its Suez Canal expansion this Thursday.

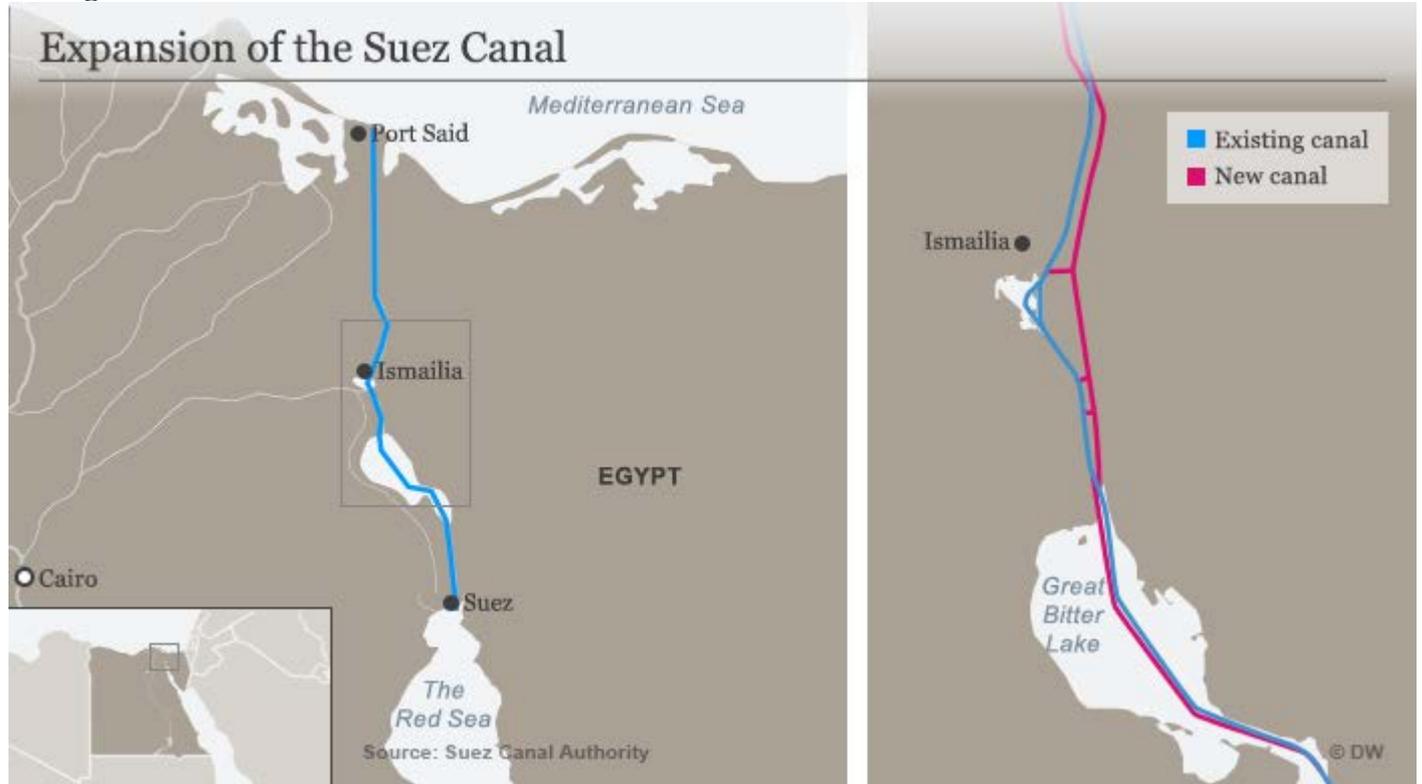
The expansion, which was completed in just 11 months, adds an additional 37-kilometer-long lane along the part of the shipping canal that connects the Red Sea with the Mediterranean. In addition, the existing canal was widened and deepened.

The government has said the expansion - which allows more ships to pass through the waterway - will nearly triple revenue from the canal, which is a major source of income for Egypt.

This comes at a time when the economy is only slowly recovering from the impact of the political turmoil following the Arab Spring and an increasingly volatile security environment.

"I think it is an amazing project that will boost the economy," 24-year-old Mahitab Mahmoud told DW. The bubbly, unemployed university graduate was standing on a street corner in the residential neighborhood of Agouza in central Cairo, where most of the residents DW spoke to shared Mahmoud's enthusiasm for the government's prestige project. The expansion, she said, smiling proudly, "will change the whole country."

Ecologists, however, are less enthused.



Invasive corridor

Bella Galil, a marine biologist from the National Institute of Oceanography in Israel, fears "it will wreak havoc on the ecology of the entire Mediterranean."

Ever since it was built some 145 years ago, the Suez Canal has acted as a corridor for the invasion of foreign species into the Mediterranean, Galil explained: As aggressive, opportunistic species arrive in the Mediterranean, they quickly spread without natural enemies such as parasites or predators to check them.

To date, 444 species have entered the Mediterranean through the Suez Canal, Galil told DW. And, as climate change heats up the Mediterranean, they're traveling north- and westward. It will basically, she added, "impossible to take these species out of the Mediterranean again."



Invasive species are devastating fish populations

Together with 17 other scientists from around the world, Galil published an article last year in [Biological Invasions](#) warning that the expansion was "ominous news" for marine invasion. Galil points to such species as the *Rhopilema nomadica*, a type of jellyfish that appears in huge annual swarms. These can be kilometers long, and first made their appearance in the Mediterranean in the late 1970s.

"We suffer from them each summer," she said: The jellyfish is highly venomous, and its sting can require hospitalization. They are also a threat to the coastal power plants, which can cause cooling systems to become clogged, and also harm fishing and tourism.

Each expansion of the Suez Canal, Galil fears, is "followed by yet another cohort of invasion into the Mediterranean."

Debate over impact

Galil, who is from Israel, realizes that her comments might be construed as politically motivated. She is quick to point out that she is not against the canal itself, given that shipping is more environmentally friendly than other forms of transport.



Canal construction also has environmental impacts

But, she added, the authorities failed to implement necessary mitigation measures, such as locks or salinity barriers, which would minimize the arrival of invasive species.

That is an accusation that a spokeswoman for Egypt's Ministry of Environment rejects. An environmental impact assessment that the government conducted showed, she told DW, that there would be "no impact at all. Otherwise we would not have continued the project."

Tarek Temraz, who served as the external consultant for the impact study, agrees. The scientist at Suez Canal University in Ismailia believes that the expansion will only have "a very minor effect on enhancing the invasive species or organisms."

"I'm not saying that everything is okay," Temraz told DW. "But not all the invasive species found in the Mediterranean are related to the Canal."

He pointed to other points of entry, such as ballast water in large ships, or crustaceans attached to ships' hulls. "Genetic fingerprinting is needed to identify where exactly these species come from." Suez Canal authorities, he added, had implemented a monitoring project which would track invasive species and identify potential threats. It would also, if necessary, "take the appropriate measures." But many Egyptians though, including Mahitab Mahmoud, probably won't be considering the environment during the inauguration.

"I'll be out on the streets celebrating this great project," she told DW.

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Expansion of the Suez Canal and marine bioinvasions in the Mediterranean

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