

Marshlands

A sheet of fresh water was released, raising hope that this vast ecosystem and the unique culture it sustained may some day be restored.

Driving east towards the Iranian border from Nasiriyah, one suddenly finds the land on either side of the road falls away to a flat, shimmering plain of water—the reviving Marshlands of Iraq.

Said by some to be the site of the Garden of Eden, the 8,000 square-mile marshlands were home to nearly one million Marsh Arabs or Madan before Saddam Hussein drained the marshes and slaughtered thousands after the Shiite revolt of 1991. Instead of slowly seeping through the marshes, nourishing the land, filtering the water, and supporting its reeds, fish and many Arab villages, Saddam's new drainage canals diverted the Tigris-Euphrates River system directly into the sea.

The loss of the Middle East's largest wetlands deprived millions of migrating birds of critical habitat and has become an ecological disaster on a scale similar to the drying up of the Aral Sea. Now the fresh waters have begun to return to the marshlands. As soon as the regime fell last year, Iraqi engineers reopened the dikes and cut some berms and dams that had been used to drain the lands and drive out the Marsh Arabs. By early October, the waters were rising over the arid



Marsh Arabs collect reeds in newly-re-flooded marshlands after dams built by Saddam

to drain the region were cut open to restore the water flow and revive the ancient

production of fish, birds, and plants.

desert flats, covering the thorny and useless plants that sprouted over the past decade where once fish, birds and animals thrived.

The United States has been helping to revive the ancient waterways, traditional villages and aquatic agriculture which not only served the Marsh Arabs but provided the number one source for protein in all of Iraq: water fowl, eggs, water buffalo, fish and milk.

Some Marsh Arabs have converted to dry farming in reclaimed lands drained in the last decade. They have found it profitable to raise crops and can be seen driving their tractors in tidy fields alongside the roads of Southern Iraq. They may be reluctant to have those fields reflooded and have made requests that

some of the dry areas remain as they have been this past decade.

In June, 2003, USAID sent the first team of water and soil scientists to the Marshes in years to talk to local leaders and determine what the Agency could do. In February, an Iraqi and international team, supported by USAID, convened in Basra and designed an action plan for the marshlands. The program created a long-term strategic plan for marsh management and will begin to restore the marshland ecosystem through improved management and strategic reflooding. It will also provide social and economic assistance to thousands of Marsh Arabs as they return to their homes.

Results

- Providing social and economic assistance to marsh dwellers.
- Funding soil and water quality lab at the new Center for Iraq Marshlands Restoration.
- Launching pilot projects to improve treatment of waste and drinking water.
- Improving healthcare.
- Creating jobs in fisheries, aquaculture, livestock production, and date-palm reproduction.
- Developing an integrated marsh management plan.

Reversing the Flow May Revive Abandoned Marsh Villages



Ben Barber/USAID

One expert from RTI discovered a pumping station that had lifted marsh waters over an earthen wall into a river, part of a mas-

sive effort to drain the marshes. RTI reverse-engineered the system to reflood that part of the marshes.



Ben Barber/USAID

Nearby stand the ruins of a village which was looted of everything after the residents fled Saddam's forces

and the retreating waters. If enough water can be restored, the marshlands may one day be reoccupied.