

KUTV: Iraqi Marshes Recovering

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Iraqi Marshes Recovering

BASRA, Iraq Southern Iraq's once-lush marshlands – devastated by Saddam Hussein – are showing signs of recovery. Former residents are returning, and hunting and fishing are reviving.

A new U.N. report, released Wednesday in Tokyo, sums up the progress, saying satellite imagery shows that 30 percent of their once-vast reach has returned.

Yet, life in the wetlands remains hard – with much poverty, little clean water and rampant sewage. These conditions kept many international aid groups from working to restore the area.

“The life is still too hard to get back to our normal life of breeding cows and buffaloes, planting arborvitae,” said Hussein, 34, who left his marsh home in 1993.

His 10-member family went back after Saddam was toppled two years ago. But Hussein stays in Baghdad as a taxi driver “to feed them,” he said Wednesday.

The largest wetland ecosystem in the Middle East and Western Eurasia, the marshlands provide a habitat for many endangered species, sustain freshwater fisheries and support the marine ecosystem of the Persian Gulf.

Saddam drained much of the Mesopotamian waters between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers in the 1970s to pull away the water – in an apparent punishment because the marsh inhabitants supported a Shia insurgency during the Iran-Iraq War. Even more dams were built in neighboring Turkey, disrupting natural water cycles that helped sustain the marshes.

Of the almost 3,600 square miles of marshes in 1970, the area shrank by 90 percent to 300 square miles by 2000. Some experts forecast the marshlands would disappear by 2008.

Instead, the new satellite imagery shows a rapid increase in water and vegetation cover in just the past few years.

rebounding to about 37 percent of their 1970 reach, the United Nations Environmental Program s

Iraqi engineers and tribal members began re-flooding parts of the wetlands by cutting gashes in c

"There are signs of life returning to the marshlands,' agreed Abdullah Ramadan, a local official in said the region is still far from being as it was in the 1970s.

"The majority of the area in Basra, Maysan and Dhi Qar (provinces) still suffers many difficulties," sewage treatment and electricity. The area had electricity during Saddam's era but now gets only

Ramadan said many government officials and international aid workers found it difficult to visit th projects because of the lack of security.

About one-third of the estimated 300,000 people who were forced to leave the area after the mar said Iraq's minister of water resources, Abdul Latif Jamal Rashid. But many have come back simp the 1990s in central and northern Iraq are now too violent.

The Sunni-led insurgency often targets Shiites.

"Since these families are Shiites, they have been forced to get back their homes because of the a said.

It will be very difficult to restore the entire marshlands, Rashid told The Associated Press at a con Stockholm, Sweden. But he said he hopes 80 percent will be restored in three years.

"Full restoration, if you're talking about the way they were in 1972, I think is impossible," said Az nongovernmental organization Eden Again, which is working to restore the marshes. 'A lot of citie have been dried," Alwash said in Tokyo as he traveled with the U.N. delegation.

Marsh residents live in shanties made of reeds and papyrus. They must collect their waste and otl then drain them into the marshes.

Last year, the United Nations announced an \$11 million project funded by Japan to help restore tl water and sanitation for 100,000 people living there.

The program – which has not yet begun – will provide villages with water treatment systems and natural water filters.

It also will train 250 Iraqis in wetland management and restoration.

So far, most previous aid money that has reached the region from private groups or foreign governments has been used to rehabilitate old water and health plants, Ramadan said.

The United Nations postponed a donors conference scheduled for this week in Tokyo, because Iraq was needed at home for constitutional negotiations, said Robert Bisset, a spokesman for the U.N. The location of the conference has not been decided.

Rashid said the new Japan-funded project will have other benefits, including symbolic value for the return of Iraqis to cities by improving agriculture.

"It will help Iraqis return to a traditional way of life," he said. "Even people in the capital, who have been proud of the project."

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