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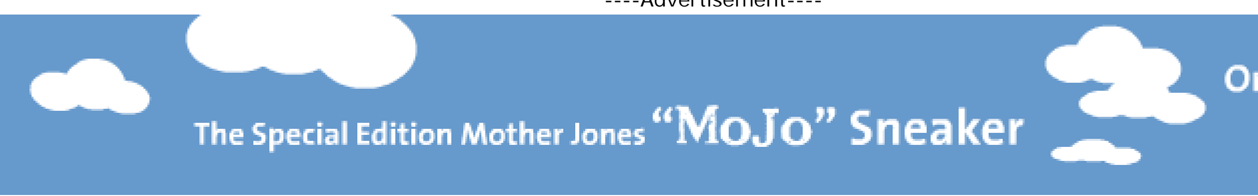

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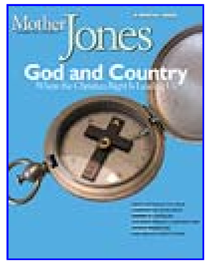

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THIS WEEK

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"There is no electricity, no water, no schools..."

NEWS: Will the marshes of southern Iraq ever recover from decades of devastation?

By David Enders
August 9, 2005

About an hour north of Basra, a young boy poles a canoe-like boat through the marshes between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers.

It was around these marshes that ancient civilization once thrived in Mesopotamia. Not far away are the ruins of Ur, a Sumerian trading center built 5000 years ago. In the 1980s and '90s, the marshes became a center of resistance against Saddam Hussein's government, as well as a smuggling point on the way to and from Iran. After the Shiite uprising in 1991, Saddam Hussein ordered the area drained—in part to flush out the rebels—and destroyed a number of villages. All told, as much as 90 percent of the marshes were burnt, displacing virtually all of the 350,000 to 500,000 inhabitants of the area, who had previously subsisted largely on fishing, raising water buffalo, and harvesting the local reeds—from which they built their houses.

In April 2003, after the fall of Saddam's regime, non-governmental organizations and the new interim government's Ministry of Water initiated a project to re-flood the marshes. Water has returned to roughly 15 to 20 percent of the estimated 12,000 to 15,000 square kilometers that were drained. Thus far, the plan has been carried out haphazardly, due to the post-invasion chaos and a lack of experts working on the project; in some places, residents have simply cut through existing roads to allow water flow. Meanwhile, some of the region's current inhabitants stand to lose their homes if all of the original land is re-flooded.

The reeds have returned, as well as some of the

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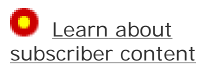
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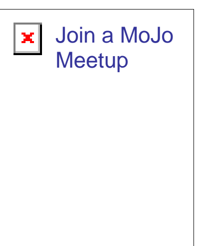

Aid Katrina Victims!

wildlife, and so have as many as 70,000 people. Not everyone, however, has returned to the region out of desire to return to their old way of life. Kheerea Shooween left the marshes in the 1990s and moved to Mussayib, a town about an hour south of Baghdad. Her family became farmers there, but two months ago they finally moved back to the marshes, because of violence in the area, often directed at S (Virtually all of the Marsh Arabs are Shiite, and they're often the focus of a good deal of ra discrimination. After they left the marshes, many of them moved into tent camps or to th Baghdad and Basra, where they were considered untouchables.)

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Nearby are the remains of a village, a reminder of previous oppressions and displacement and municipal buildings have been reduced to their crumbling foundations, either sitting islands in the areas that have been reflooded or else desolately in the salt flats on the othe road, where the water has not returned.

"There is no electricity, no water, no schools," Shooween says.

Others say they have no interest in returning to their former way of life. Mutlaq Saleh Ha of the Albu Sweileh tribe, once lived by fishing, herding and hunting birds. His family left the 1980s but returned in 1997. He and his sons now work as a day laborers in a nearby to living in an area that was once underwater. The area is among the poorest in the country, basic infrastructure—residents place 55-gallon barrels on the side of the main road like m filled each day by a water tanker.

"We went to the governorate and asked them to build a dam so that our land won't be floo it to Baghdad, and the government said we would have a dam. But they have not built it. W water to be back, but we also want proper housing," Hassan said, referring to the cinderbl his family built when they returned to the area.

Azzam Al-Awash is the head of Eden Again, a project dedicated to refilling the marshes. T engineer, Awash emigrated from Iraq to California when he was 20. While growing up, he to and seen the marshes with his father, the district's head engineer. He returned to Iraq invasion, and now employs 60 Iraqis on the project, which includes a plan for completely area and building villages.

Awash's plan, which he recently presented to the Iraqi National Assembly, has come into pre-existing plan by the Ministry of Agriculture—drawn up in the 1980s—that calls for the some of the land that has been cleared and for total reclamation of marshland for farming

"If there is political will to restore the marshes, we can restore the marshes," Awash said. farmers, who live in a land where the salt leaves a crust of white on the light-brown earth: groundwater table is salty, it burns. At first everything grows, but you see them now, inste harvesting, they just let their cattle graze," Awash said. "The people who tell you they wan are either confused or don't understand the question."

Awash's team spent three months intensely studying the restoration of the marshes near Zirig—some of the first to be re-flooded. Buffalo had returned to the area, as had the fish birds. Seeing new species appearing in the local market, Awash paid one hunter to take hi birds had been found and discovered rookeries.

"It was like, what's going on here?" he said. "We couldn't believe it. The reeds were comin

Education might the biggest hurdle to restoring the marshes. Some fishermen who have r area use arsenic or even dynamite to make their catches. Further upstream, cities such as their waste directly into the river. The same occurs with runoff from farmers' fields. "Iraq

as an open sewer," Awash says.

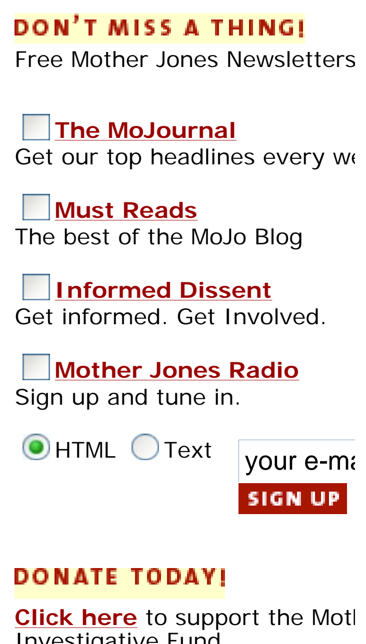
Awash has a plan to build villages in the marshes, complete with modern amenities, that
on the old methods of fishing, herding and cutting reeds. He hopes to build the first villag
year and then tweak the model for future projects, based on its success.

Awash's optimism—"In five years, we could have ecotourism here," he says—is perhaps tc
of the poorest parts of the country, and an area that is still dangerous. Even with a small
revival in the region, the the men who took this journalist to the marshes still insisted on
for safety, and were careful to explain to people in the villages that we had no association
American NGO that, the people said, had made promises of reconstruction but had not be
months. (Officially, the U.S. Agency for International Development has spent $4 million
over the past four years.) The area is still extremely tribal, so much so that some of the m
Medina, a town about a half-hour north of Basra, claim that doctors are afraid to operate
fear they will be blamed if the patient dies.

"Police are sometimes afraid to make arrests," one man says.

The people also once again feel abandoned by the central government. They swarm our c
"maku!" (nothing). No water, no gas, no electricity. These are the same complaints heard
country. Iraqis are at least unified in this.

David Enders is a freelance journalist who has been working in Iraq for most two years. His first book, *Baghdad Bulletin*, is available from University of M Press.



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