

Search

Advanced Search

News & Analysis | RFE/RL Newsline © | Reports | Specials | RFE/RL Pressroom
Subscribe | Listen | RFE/RL Languages | Job Opportunities | Site Map

News by Country

News by Language

Friday, August 26, 2005

E-mail this page to a friend Print Version

Iraq: Marshlands Drained By Saddam Shown To Be Recovering At Rapid Rate

By Breffni O'Rourke



Marsh Arab refugees lead water buffalo along the banks of the Karun River (Hassan Partow / UNEP)

The UN's Environment Program says new satellite imagery shows the rapid recovery of Iraq's marshlands between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. The good news

comes as a leading British politician, Baroness Emma Nicholson, is calling for more attention to be given to rehabilitating Iraq's Marsh Arabs. Nicholson -- well known for her support for human rights causes -- says foreign aid organizations must be less "colonial" in their approach, and listen more to what the marsh people want.

Prague, 26 August 2005 (RFE/RL) -- The marshes, considered to be the inspiration for the Biblical Garden of Eden, were drained in the early 1990s by Iraqi President Saddam Hussein. His action was seen -- at least in part -- as a way to punish the Marsh Arabs for joining a Shi'a Muslim rebellion against Baghdad following the first Gulf War.

Some 90 percent of the vast, reedy marsh was destroyed, resulting in the loss of the area's teeming animal life and the unbalancing of fish stocks even in the upper reaches of the Persian Gulf.

Scientists have called the marsh drainage one of history's great ecological disasters. It followed Hussein's other major environmental crime -- setting fire to Kuwaiti oil wells as his forces retreated in 1991.

Soon after Hussein's regime fell to U.S.-led forces in April 2003, work started on restoring the thousands of square kilometers of lost Iraqi marshland.

One of the many organizations that has been assisting in the regeneration of the marshlands is called Eden

More About Iraq:

[August 25, 2005] [Al-Sadr Reasserts Himself -- This Time Against Coreligionists](#)

[August 25, 2005] [Efforts Under Way To Complete Draft Constitution As Tensions Rise](#)

[August 23, 2005] [Devil In The Constitutional Details](#)

[August 23, 2005] [Leaders Struggle With Constitutional Crisis Over Federalism](#)

[August 22, 2005] [Government Spokesman, Drafting Committee Members Discuss Constitution Negotiations](#)

[August 22, 2005] [Draft Constitution Due Today, But No Certainty It Is Ready](#)

[archive news on Iraq](#)

Other News

[NATO Ministers Discuss Expanded Role In Afghanistan](#)

Again. Ali Douabul of the Eden Again project is enthusiastic about the progress being made. He spoke to RFE/RL from Baghdad.

"This area can survive and thrive. It can go back to being one of the major food-producing areas, not just for Iraq, but for the region as a whole."

"Our past experience and the work we have done has made us realize that a lot of the marshland that has been re-inundated after liberation is now behaving in a very normal manner, in a way which shows that most of the ecosystem has been stabilized now," Douabul said.

The UN's Environment Program (UNEP) said in a report issued on 24 August that the latest satellite imagery shows a rapid increase in water and plant coverage. Almost 40 percent of the area of the marshlands has now recovered.

Douabul said maintaining water quantity and quality is one of the main difficulties facing the marshes. Iraq's neighbors Turkey, Syria, and Iran have been building dams, reducing the flow into the marshes. He says it will be one of the tasks of the new Iraqi government to negotiate with its neighbors to ensure the survival of the marshes.

Meanwhile, Baroness Emma Nicholson, a British member of the European Parliament, says it's time to rethink the process of regenerating the marshlands. She believes more emphasis should be placed on the needs of the returning Marsh Arabs. Nicholson is the organizer of a charitable foundation -- Assisting Marsh Arabs and Refugees -- that has been helping the hundreds of thousands of Marsh Arabs who had to flee their land.



Giant reeds have withered for lack of water (Hassan Partow / UNEP)

The 300,000-strong marsh community -- many of whose livelihood depended upon fishing, hunting, and farming -- was devastated by the drainage. Most of the

displaced people became refugees in camps in their own country or in neighboring Iran.

Nicholson tells RFE/RL that the international organizations who are working to bring the marshes back to life should listen to the marsh dwellers, who were able for 5,000 years to sustain a successful and highly productive way of life.

"This area can survive and thrive. It can go back to being one of the major food-producing areas, not just for Iraq, but for the region as a whole. They sold fish far and wide. They provided dairy produce for the whole of Iraq. These people really counted," Nicholson said.

Nicholson accuses international organizations that are helping the Iraqi authorities restore the marshes of pursuing their own plans -- for instance, for eco-tourism -- instead of letting the local people have their say.

"Outside organizations really must be less colonial, less interventionist, and less dictatorial," Nicholson said.

A summit to finance further restoration of the marshes was to have been held in Tokyo this week. But a UNEP spokesman, Robert Bisset, said officials decided not to hold the meeting at this time because Iraqi Environment Minister Nermin Othman had to return to Baghdad amid ongoing efforts to draft an Iraqi constitution.

See also:

[RFE/RL Special: Reviving Iraq's Marshlands](#)

[top](#)

[homepage](#)

[features](#)

[archive news on Iraq](#)

[RSS](#)

Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty © 2006 RFE/RL, Inc. All Rights Reserved. Contact us: web@rferl.org