

- Free Zone
- Front
- Canada
- World
- Opinion
 - Letters
 - Insight
- Local
- Life
- Arts
- Sports
- Business
- Classified

Weekly Sections

- Grand River
 - Life
- Perspectives
- Books
- Faith
- Homes
- Travel
- Wheels

Reader Services

- My subscription
- Place a classified ad
- Write to the editor
- Contact us
- Site feedback

The following story has been made available to all readers as a courtesy to a non-profit organization. To read more news on TheRecord.com you are invited to [subscribe](#).

Reversing Iraq's 'ecological disaster'

Tuesday September 27, 2005
DAVE PINK
RECORD STAFF

(Originally published on August 18, 2005)

WATERLOO -- A group of Iraqi scientists is in Waterloo, discussing strategies to reverse an ecological disaster and, maybe, help stabilize the war-torn country's economy.

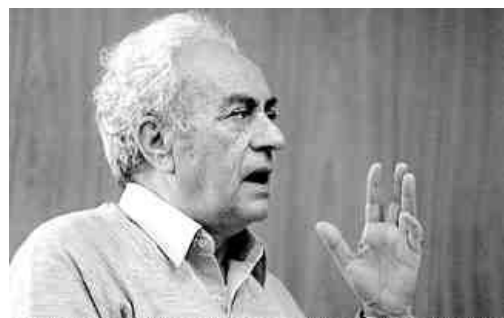
The massive Mesopotamian Marshes, in southern Iraq between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, were drained and allowed to bake into desert during Saddam Hussein's regime.

"This was an ecological disaster of major proportions. Imagine something the size of Lake Ontario disappearing," says Barry Warner, a University of Waterloo wetlands ecologist.

Now, Iraqi and Canadian scientists say it's vital the marshes be restored, and they're working together to make it happen.

"For those that were opposed to Saddam Hussein, the marshes were a refuge. So the best way to eliminate the rebels was the drying up of the marshes," explains Ali Douabal, an Iraqi aquatic biologist. "That way, he was able to control the area."

The marshes, fed by the rivers, spread out over 20,000 square kilometres and for centuries the region was a vital food production and climate control feature in the hot, dry Middle East. Many people believe that if there was a Garden of Eden, this was it.



Iraqi scientist Majeed Al Hilli speaks to an audience during a meeting at the University of Waterloo Wetlands Research Centre. Scientists discussed possible solutions to damage done to wildlife areas in Iraq.



Iraq

Then, Saddam dammed the rivers and the marshland dwindled to almost nothing. Now, since Saddam's fall, water is flowing once again.

"It was the people themselves that broke down the dykes and let the water flow," says scientist Jamal Abaychi. About 35 per cent of the original marshland has been reflooded.

"Now, the question is, how much of the wetlands do we want to restore?"

Reflooding does not equate to restoration, the scientists say.

And water is in short supply in the area, they say, largely because of dams in Syria and Turkey near the headwaters of the two major rivers.

As well, there is the potential for oil production in the area.

The Mesopotamian Marshes were once home to about 700,000 people, and a wide variety of fish, plants and wildlife. Then the wildlife died off, many of the people fled to neighbouring Iran and Jordan, average temperatures in the area rose five degrees Celsius, and dust storms became common.

Now the people are returning, and hoping to resume their lives as fishermen and farmers. Before Saddam, 60 per cent of the fish consumed in Iraq came for the marshes, the scientists say.

"These people are coming home," says Ali. How successful they will be depends on how well the area is restored -- and that could be a turning point for Iraq, he says.

"It's important for the economy that they can get back on to the land. Then the tendency for violence will be reduced," says Ali.

The co-operative effort involving Iraqi and Canadian scientists was suggested by Warner, a past president of the international Society of Wetland Scientists.

"The issue of the Mesopotamian Marshes was well known in the wetland community, but during Saddam's time all the rest of the world could do was watch," he says.

The Canadian government has committed \$300 million to help with the restoration of Iraq, says Warner, adding that he was able to convince the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) to make the marshlands restoration project part of the aid package.

Canadian scientists will assist with the aquatic redevelopment of the area, while Italy is helping with the project's hydrology work and Japan is helping to develop wetland administration policies.

"We're trying to restore the lifestyle of a people whose culture had not changed since before the time of Christ," says Warner.

The Iraqis arrived Aug. 6 for a five-day conference of international wetlands specialists in Montreal, then were in Ottawa, and visited a restored wetland area near Midland. They arrived in Waterloo two days ago, for seminars and scientific discussions.

"It gives the Iraqis a chance to talk with other scientists from around the world," says Warner.

"They were cut off from the rest of the scientific world all the time Saddam was in power, so part of this effort is helping them reconnect with the wider world again."

But for now, as long as Iraq remains politically unstable, the Canadians will not be able to visit the marshes and can help out only from a distance.

Life in Iraq remains uncertain, both Jamal and Ali say.

"The people have gotten rid of a brutal regime," says Jamal.

"On the other hand, the security situation is very bad," says Ali. "Nobody is safe. People can be blown up anywhere."

"We're waiting for the constitution (now being hammered out by Iraq's new elected government) and that will give us more stability."

Still, "We are optimistic," says Jamal.

"We are very grateful to CIDA," he says. "Iraq is not a poor country, and hopefully we will be able to help other countries."

dpink@therecord.com

 [Make this page printer friendly](#)



THE RECORD

© 2006
160 King Street East,
Kitchener, Ontario, Canada, N2G 4E5
519-894-2231