

## A Meeting of the Marsh Arabs Forum

I was sitting in my office in Baghdad during a hot September afternoon when I got a call from the guards saying that there were two people from Nasseriya who wanted to meet me. Dr. Ali Abd Al Zahra and myself met with the two gentlemen who told us that they represent a newly formed organization in Nasseriya called the Marsh Arab Forum and they intend to convene a conference in Nasseriya focused on demanding the restoration of the marshes and economical development for the area. They asked for our help with the organization and financial support. Dr. Ali and I agreed to match whatever funding the Marsh Arab Forum could raise from the locals and indicated to them that there are several conferences that have been held outside of Iraq and it would be great to hold this conference inside Iraq. We discussed the agenda for the conference and they took some of our suggestions and altered some of their ideas to fit with our suggestions.



*Participants at the Marsh Arabs Forum*

municipal council representatives were all invited. Word spread out and while we had anticipated an attendance of 200 people, we were overwhelmed by over 400 people showing up on the first day of the conference on December 1st. This created some diplomatic problems as heads of major tribes were seated in the back.

The conference was held in Al Islah, a small town at the headwaters of the Abu Zirig marsh. People came by car from Nasseriya, Ammara, Basra, and Baghdad. Some even came by mashhoof from the interior of the reflooded marshlands. It was held in a newly refurbished (by the Italian army) meeting room in the local council in Al Islah.

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## Introducing Nature-Iraq & the Work Plan 2005

We have a very busy year ahead of us at Eden Again.

First we have started Nature-Iraq which is going to be an Iraqi NGO with a sister affiliation to the Iraq Foundation. The responsibilities for all environmental projects started under the auspices of the Eden Again project of Iraq Foundation will pass along to Nature-Iraq. We will share resources with Iraq Foundation both in Iraq and in DC and we will coordinate our action where coordination is warranted. Nature-Iraq will be the parent organization for the following projects:

Eden Again/New Eden, which is sponsored by the Italian Ministry of Environment and Territory (IMET), will now be one of the projects of Nature-Iraq. The projects is focused on helping Iraq create a master plan for the restoration of the marshes as well as the development of the infrastructure and services in the marsh area. IMET has funding for this year for master plan work and additional funding will be forthcoming for actual construction projects.

The Bio-Diversity Survey and University Network projects which are sponsored by the University of Waterloo through a grant from the Canadian International Development Agency. These two projects are part of the over all effort of the Canadian initiatives. Other projects under the same initiative are being discussed. The Canadian initiative is a three years project focused on capacity building in the Iraqi Environmental Curriculum field as well as Ministry of Environment and NGO building. Remote sensing analyses and training. A portion of this project is being sponsored.

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## *New on the Eden Again Website!*

### **Original Oil Painting by Kamal Al Mousawi**

Support Iraqi Artists and Nature Iraq! Nature-Iraq has over 45 unique and colorful oil paintings in the impressionist style by Nassaria painter Kamal Al Mousawi. Mousawi who graduated from the Fine Arts Institute of Iraq in 1967 still lives and paints in Iraq. You can view the Nature-Iraq collection on the Eden Again website at [www.edenagain.org](http://www.edenagain.org). These paintings are available by check or money order. Check the website for pricing and purchase details.



## ABOUT US

***Nature-Iraq is a Iraqi Environmental Non-Governmental Organization registered in Iraq. Nature-Iraq builds civil society networks to protect the environment of Iraq and develops capacity within Iraq, both in private and publicly-owned industries, to help clean and protect the environment.***

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sored through IMET funding with coordination through the United Nations Environmental Program's (UNEP) project, which is sponsored by Japan.

### **Current projects status:**

Work on the monitoring of Abu Zirig and Kermashia area of the Hammar marsh is continuing and will be completed in March. A comprehensive report will be published documenting all the data collected along with the computer models as well as the designs for the control structures to be built to manage Abu Zirig marsh. We regret that the funding for this project from US Agency for International Development (USAID) was not renewed beyond the first year, which was an example of coordination and partnership in work on the marshes between international donors and Iraqi institutes and NGO'. Funding to complete the ecological aspects of monitoring under this project is being provided by the Italian Ministry of Environment and Territory.

The second field training for the Biodiversity Survey team has just been completed in Syria at the end of January under the tutelage of Dr. Richard Porter of Birdlife International with the Support of CIDA and the University of Waterloo. Shortly thereafter, field surveys for Key Biodiversity Areas will start in coordination with the Iraqi Ministry of Environment, The Iraqi Ministry of Water Resources, The Iraqi Nature Conservation Society, Basra University, and Dhi Qar University.

The feasibility study for the use of flared gas energy to provide potable water for the southern marshes area will be completed and published in early March of this year. This project has been funded entirely with IMET funding and coordination with the Iraqi Ministry of Municipalities and Public Works. Future work on this project is being evaluated to take it to the implementation phase.

A major project will be started in February to expand the successful work that we have undertaken in the Abu Zirig and Kermashia areas to the rest of the Central and Hammar Marshes. In addition, we will include studies for the infrastructure of communities in and around the marshes area. This project is being considered for funding by IMET. This work is going to be a major challenge as the security situation is deteriorating, but nevertheless, we are determined to proceed. We are recruiting personnel to staff the survey teams, and we are coordinating our efforts with the Ministries of Water Resources, Environment, and Municipalities and Public Works.

We will be working with the Iraqi Ministries of Environment and Water Resources on issues relating to ground truthing for the remote sensing project. We will coordinate our field visits conducted for the larger IMET project with UNEP's needs to get ground truthing data. So this project is going to be an example of partnership work that is desperately needed to coordinate all the ongoing efforts.

Nature-Iraq has negotiated an agreement with the Iraqi Ministry of Municipalities and Public Works for funding to collect and compile data regarding all the available infrastructure and land use information and integrate that information with the GIS database developed by our team as part of the New Eden project. This is an exciting project as it is integral with the master plan project that is being started under IMET funding and it is yet another example of partnership between NGO's Iraqi governmental organization, and international donors for the service of the marsh arabs.

We will also start the University Network project with funding from CIDA/University of Waterloo. And lastly, we will be working with other Iraqi NGOs on stakeholder involvement in Iraq.

*Nymphaea caerulea*  
A waterlily of the Iraqi Marshes



### *Marsh Arabs Forum, Cont. from Page 1*

We started late after arranging enough seating for the unexpected participant and began the meeting with a reading of the Koran, followed by a speech by the governor of Dhi Qar and various ministers. The morning also featured an art show by a local artist and a visit to the reflooded marsh.

The Abu Zirig marshes are located 50 km northeast of Nasseriya. In April 2003, the Ministry of Water Resources, at the request of local citizens, broke an embankment and reflooded an area of approximately 120 square kilometers. The Eden Again Project has been sending in teams to monitor this area since March of 2003.

The conference participants climbed into motor boats from the bridge area at Al Islah and went into the northern portion of Abu Zirig along the main canals. Thick reed beds, in some places over 2 meters tall, have grown over the last year.



*Gathering for lunch*



*Lunch brought in to feed the conference participants*

The reed beds line the major canals and made access difficult to the interior parts of the marsh. The temperature was cold and the reeds are yellowish and dormant. In areas of open water, fishermen with nets are all over the place. The connection between north and south Abu Zirig has recently been repaired, preventing people from crossing from north to south by boat.

When they returned to Al Islah, the participants headed to Rumaith mudhif and three additional large tents to partake of the generously provided lunch. A special area was reserved for the 11 or 12 women attendees who were participating in the conference. Sheikh Sabah Al Rumaith had 55 sheep slaughtered to feed the crowd and the women of the village provided the cooking. Following lunch, a smaller meeting was organized for the presentation of scientific papers at the Governors office in Nasseriya, which lasted well into the night and was only interrupted due to the loss of electrical services. The meeting continued the next day at Al

Janoob Hotel (where there is a generator!). Well over 100 people attended this second day of meetings with robust discussions regarding different proposals being put on the table by various researchers. Recommendations were collected and discussed, modified and revised at length and a summary is listed in the box below.

### *Recommendations of the Marsh Arab Forum Conference Held in the Town of Al Islah, on December 1st and 2nd, 2004*

1. Participants agreed on the importance of the restoration of the marshes to their natural state and the preservation of the traditional agricultural lands
2. Of highest priority is the construction of infrastructure in the region of the marshes, such as roads, health care centers, schools, mosques, electricity, and potable water
3. Protection of agricultural lands along both sides of the Euphrates (traditional agricultural lands) and the construction of drains is needed. A study on how to reduce of the salinity of the Euphrates' waters is needed.
4. Developmental projects and investments in the marshes are needed to reduce unemployment in the ranks of the youth.
5. Women and children issues are of great importance and education programs for women on child care and rearing are needed through the opening of educational centers for women and provision of work opportunities suitable for women.
6. Staffing to fill existing vacancies at health care centers and schools, especially in technical fields is needed. It is preferable that these vacancies be filled from the local population that has the technical background needed. The participants request that the experiment of "floating health care centers" be widened to include all the restored marshes.
7. A survey for mine fields and unexploded ordinance is needed and work to remove these hazards is paramount. In addition, educational programs regarding protection from these hazards for the locals and returning refugees are needed.
8. The construction of modern integrated residential compounds with basic services such as schools, health care centers, veterinary care centers, potable water, electricity, and sewage. These compounds should make use of locally available materials such as reeds and papyrus with care for the specifics of the area and the needs of its people.
9. The institution of compulsory education for children is stressed. Further, programs for remedial education for elders are needed. Accelerated education programs for the youth are paramount for the modernization of the society.
10. It is paramount that the government rapidly provides support and basic services to the returning refugees in the marshes area through accelerated construction of schools, health care centers, potable water networks and other services. It is important that humanitarian agencies participate in this effort.
11. The formation of a special commission to collect evidence on the campaign against the marshes by the former regime is recommended. Participants stressed that the drying of the marshes was a genocidal campaign against humanity and the natural environment.
12. The compensation of those who have suffered should be considered.
12. Protection of the marshes is necessary and it is stressed that prohibition of the use of fishing methods that stress the environment, such as the use of poisons, pesticides, explosives, and electrocution should be prohibited. The enforcement of such prohibitions is the job of the government, religious leaders, tribal leaders and notables. The use of media outlets is necessary to educate the populace.
13. Formation of a committee directly under the Council of Ministers for the restoration of the marshes and institution of a law for the protection of the marshes is needed
14. Invite specific teams to monitor and survey for remnants of depleted uranium pollution in the area.
15. The success if the conference leads to convening an international conference in Iraq about the marshes and its restoration. The conference should be attended by donor nations, and international organizations that work on the restoration to encourage local, Arab and international investment.
16. The participants call for the adoption of the 2nd of December of every year as the National Day of the Iraqi Marshes.

