

# First international gathering of Middle East NGOs marks a new era for nature conservation in Iraq.

## Title

The first ever gathering of international civil society organisations for nature in post-Saddam Iraq has taken place in Sulaimaniya, Iraqi Kurdistan, hosted by BirdLife Partner Nature Iraq. The event, the tenth annual meeting of BirdLife's Middle Eastern Partnership, drew representatives from the most active nature conservation organisations in the region. BirdLife International is the largest Partnership of national civil society organisations in the region with representatives in Baharain, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Oman, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria and Yemen. "Our growth and achievements in such a short time owe much to the dedication of our staff, but also to the support we have received from within the BirdLife Partnership," said Nature Iraq's CEO, Nadheer Abood. "We are at a crucial turning point where we can shape the country's nature conservation agenda and conserve the amazing natural heritage of our country for the benefit of nature and people alike".



BirdLife International is the largest Partnership of national civil society organisations in the Middle East with representatives across the region.

"Nature Iraq are a pioneering and capable organization in the area of conservation," said *Dr Kamal Lateef*, Deputy Minister, *Ministry of Environment*, "We work closely with Nature Iraq, and together we have achieved many successful steps towards the preservation and

sustainability of the wildlife and environment in Iraq that we are proud of. The best example is the restoration of the Iraqi marshlands which were the victim of the crime of deliberate draining. Now, the Madan, vegetation, birds and other animals are back to the Mesopotamian paradise” “We are very excited to have Nature Iraq as BirdLife Partner and we are deeply impressed by the dedication, professionalism, knowledge base and conservation achievements of this young and extremely dynamic organisation” said BirdLife International CEO Dr Marco Lambertini who attended in person the meeting. “We are very proud that the tenth BirdLife Middle East Partnership meeting was the first ever meeting of an international nature conservation organisation to take place in Iraq. It is a great recognition of Nature Iraq efforts and dedication and testimony of how civil society is fast developing in Iraq. The development of civil society organisations like Nature Iraq brings real hope to our quest for a future where nature is valued and people live sustainably respecting the environment”. Nature Iraq is the country’s most influential conservation organisation. Now with a staff of 37, and conservation projects across the country, is also slowly developing a membership base. Nature Iraq actively supports the capacity of Iraq's institutions to protect the environment, encourages environmental awareness and stewardship, and promotes the sustainable use of Iraq's natural resources. Among the young NGO’s most spectacular achievements is the restoration of a large area of the Mesopotamian Marshes, which were drained under Saddam. With the support of BirdLife Partnership staff Nature Iraq is also developing biodiversity database of sites and species, environmental conditions and trends within Iraq, following 30 years of scientific isolation. “We have completed six years of surveys in over 200 sites throughout Iraq,” said Nadheer Abood. “These are the Key Biodiversity Sites that represent the foundations for our country’s protected area network. We are working closely with the Ministry of Environment to declare soon the first National Parks” The BirdLife Middle East meeting discussed the Partnership’s work to save the region’s biodiversity and improve the livelihoods of local people through programmes and initiatives, such as the innovative Hima fund which aims to revive the traditional and sustainable use of natural areas for the benefit of local communities and wildlife. A Hima Fund to support the development of local projects has been recently launched with the support of Sheikha Jawaher Bint Hamad Bin Sahim Al-Thani and the Friends of the Environment, the Qatari BirdLife Affiliate organisation.