Title

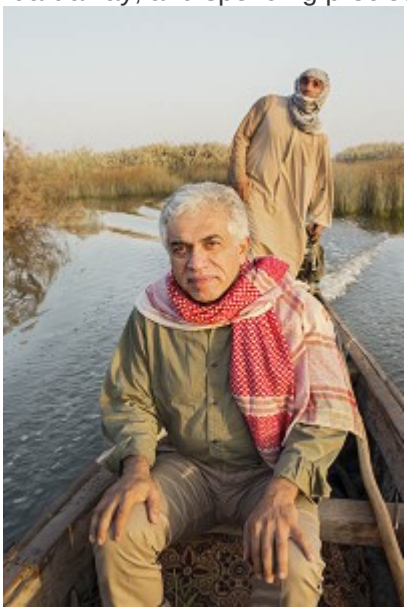
The Goldman Environmental Foundation has announced the six recipients of the 2013 Goldman Environmental Prize, a group of fearless leaders working against all odds to protect the environment and their communities. Amongst this year's winners is Azzam Alwash, CEO of Nature Iraq, BirdLife's Partner in the country.

"The Goldman Environmental Prize for Asia to Azzam Alwash is a prestigious tribute to the dedication and determination of individuals who are working in difficult socio-political situations to build a sustainable world where people and nature can live in harmony", said Dr Marco Lambertini, BirdLife's Chief Executive. "It is a major acknowledgment to Azzam personally and indirectly to the organisation he is part of, Nature Iraq which we are proud to have as the BirdLife Partner in Iraq. A source of inspiration, motivation and hope for all of us."

The Mesopotamian marshlands in southern Iraq are known by many as the birthplace of civilization and are considered by some as the original 'garden of Eden'. Situated between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, the area was once an oasis of aquatic and one of the world's most important migratory flyways for birds.

In the mid-1990s, Saddam Hussein burned, drained and poisoned the area and the wetlands once known as the Garden of Eden turned to dust bowls.

As a young boy in Iraq, Azzam Alwash spent many days out in the marshes with his father, who was head of the irrigation department in the area during the early 1960s. He fondly remembers looking over the side of the boat into very clear water, watching large fish dart away, and spending precious time with his busy father whose work often required his presence in the field.



When Hussein rose to power, Alwash moved to the United States to escape persecution. When the Hussein regime fell, Alwash knew the time had come for him to go back to restore the beloved marshes of his childhood. In 2003, he made the difficult choice of giving up a comfortable life in California and moved back to war-torn Iraq, with the hopes that one day his own daughters might be able to see the place he had loved as a child.

In 2004, Alwash founded the BirdLife Partner, Nature Iraq and put his experience in hydraulic engineering to use, surveying the region and developing a master plan to restore the marshes. He reached out to the environment and water resource ministries to educate government officials about the environmental, social and economic benefits of restoring the marshes.

His work was not only politically challenging; it was dangerous as well. Security guards are a regular presence during his field work with his staff, and the possibility of kidnappings and assassinations loom large. Nature Iraq's office has been raided by armed terrorists.

Despite these hurdles, the Mesopotamian marshes are starting to flourish again as a result of Alwash's advocacy, the restored marshes are slated to be established as the country's first national park in the spring of 2013.

While continuing the restoration work, Alwash is now fighting a new threat to Iraq's environment: an extensive chain of 23 dams upstream along the Turkey-Syria border, which if completed, would reduce the flow of water into Iraq to a mere trickle. He is organizing a flotilla tour to call global attention to the threat of water-based conflicts and turning the dams into an opportunity to revive conversations about the need to protect water resources in the broader region.

The Goldman Environmental Prize, now in its 24th year, is awarded annually to environmental heroes from each of the world's six inhabited continental regions. With an individual cash prize of $150,000, it is the largest award for grassroots environmental activism