Miracle in the marshes of Iraq

Title

A film documentary on the regeneration of Iraq's Mesopotamian Marshes, a project led by Azzad Alwash, the CEO of BirdLife Affiliate Nature Iraq, will get its first public screening tomorrow on the UK's BBC TV Channel. The documentary is being shown at 2000 GMT on BBC2's Natural World series. The Mesopotamian marshlands are one of the most extensive wetland ecosystems in western Eurasia, and are home to a rich diversity of life, including a number of endemic and threatened bird species. But in the 1990s Saddam Hussein drained the Mesopotamian Marshes to punish the indigenous Marsh Arab tribes, who had risen against him after the first Gulf War. Within months, the marshes, which had covered 15,000 square kilometres, were reduced to less than 10% of their original size.

The effects were devastating. The marshes had been of crucial importance to wildlife and people in the region. Surrounded by deserts, they were a vital source of fresh water, and provided a much-needed rest and feeding area for migratory birds making the journey between Eurasia and Africa. With the marshes virtually destroyed, the wildlife populations collapsed.

Azzam Alwash used to accompany his father, a government water engineer, on trips into the marshes, trips which infused him with a love of the this "magical waterworld". After the fall of Saddam Hussein, Azzam returned to Iraq to help restore the marshes. To that end he established Nature Iraq, an organisation dedicated to the protection and restoration of Iraq's natural heritage. Now large sections of the marshes have been restored, and in places the reed beds once again stretch as far as the eye can see. Among the highlights of *Miracle in the marshes of Iraq* is a sighting of a large flock of globally Vulnerable Marbled Teal *Marmaronetta angustirostris* in an area where they have not been seen for 20 years. In winter 2010, Nature Iraq counted 46,000 Marbled Teal in the marshes, around twice the previous estimate of the entire global population. As Azzad Alwash says in the film, "when we tell this to Birdlife International, I think they're going to be uncorking champagne!" Nature Iraq has undertaken six winter and six summer surveys of the Southern Marshes since 2005 - the most comprehensive survey of any wetland in the Middle East. The surveys have shown that no species of breeding bird has become extinct in the marshes, and that many are increasing as the marshes respond to re-flooding. For example, the surveys show that the endemic and globally Endangered Basra Reed Warbler *Acrocephalus griseldis* has increased in numbers since the re-flooding of the marshes, and that the endemic Iraq Babbler *Turdoides altirostris* is increasing its range in the marshes and along the Tigris and Euphrates, and spreading into neighbouring countries. The surveys have shown that the marshes are also very important for migrant Black-tailed Godwits *Limosa limosa*, breeding Ferruginous Ducks *Aythya nyroca* and wintering Eastern Imperial Eagles *Aquila heliaca* and Greater Spotted Eagles *Aquila clanga* - all globally threatened species. But the marshes are once again in jeopardy. Upstream dams have disrupted the traditional water cycle, and the spring floods that used to flush out accumulated salt deposits and replenish the marshes with fresh minerals no longer occur. As a result the marshes are becoming more saline, affecting the ecology of the area. By 2007 over 50% of the marshes had been restored, but now the proportion of restored marshland has dropped to nearer 30%. The wildlife resurgence is under threat, and the Marsh Arabs who have returned face the prospect of having to leave again. Azzam and Nature Iraq are masterminding steps to address this second drying. A large embankment across the Euphrates is being built to raise the level of the river, to flood a large area of the Central Marshes. This is just a stop-gap measure while work progresses on a long-term solution that will shut down one of Saddam's drainage canals, redistributing water using a network of regulators to ensure a ready supply of water to the Central Marshes. Azzam says, "if we can restore the marshes, then we can restore Iraq". He adds: "What we've learned is that the people and the environment are interconnected here. What's good for the environment is good for the people, what's good for the people is good for the environment, so they are not separate."