



**Iraq: Project to Restore Marshlands of Mesopotamia** posted on 08/03/04

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The large-scale conversion of the Mesopotamian Marshlands to wheatfields in the 20th century has decreased biodiversity in the region.

Photo: UNEP/DEWA/EUROPE/GRID-Geneva

The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) has announced an \$11 million project to restore Iraq's troubled Marshlands of Mesopotamia. The historic marshlands, known as the Fertile Crescent, are recovering from massive damage suffered in the late 20th century.

In addition to being the home of such endangered birds as the Sacred Ibis and African darter, the marshlands are the origin of a 5,000 year-old human civilization whose current inhabitants are heirs to the ancient Babylonians and Sumerians.

A main goal of the project is to restore reed-beds and other marshland habitats, which act as natural water-filtration systems. The restoration effort will focus on returning

biodiversity, building new habitat for birds and other key wildlife and providing clean drinking water and sanitation systems for key communities in the area.

Past Iraqi regimes have hampered these goals through various feats of engineering, such as damming portions of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers and conducting large-scale drainage operations.

Following the collapse of Saddam Hussein's regime in mid-2003, Iraqis began to release the floodgates on these rivers, returning much-needed water back to the marshlands. Satellite photos taken in April 2004 indicate that one-fifth of the land (about 3,000 square kilometers) has now been re-flooded.

"The Marshlands of Mesopotamia constitute the largest wetland ecosystem in the Middle East and Western Eurasia," said Klaus Toepfer, UNEP's Executive Director, who noted that half the world's wetlands have been lost in the past 100 years.

In 2001, the UNEP alerted the world to a 90 percent loss of the Marshlands of Mesopotamia, based on satellite images. More recent research from 2003 shows a further decrease of three percent of this region. Experts fear that unless immediate measures are taken, the entire area will be wiped out by 2008.

According to Toepfer, the UNEP intends to use this project as a learning tool to further marshland restoration in other areas of the globe.

Cleaning up waterways is an important part of restoring wildlife diversity around the world. Canadians can contribute to the global watershed restoration effort by participating in the 2004 **Great Canadian Shoreline Cleanup** from September 11-19.

Source: Vancouver Aquarium Marine Science Centre

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