

“Garden of Eden” in Southern Iraq Likely to Disappear Completely in Five Years Unless Urgent Action Taken

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UNEP Says Post-War Rehabilitation Should Include the Marshlands of Mesopotamia for the Sake of People and Wildlife

Kyoto/Nairobi, 22 March 2003 - The Marshlands of Mesopotamia, considered by some to be the Biblical location of the Garden of Eden and known as the fertile crescent, are continuing to disappear at an alarming rate.

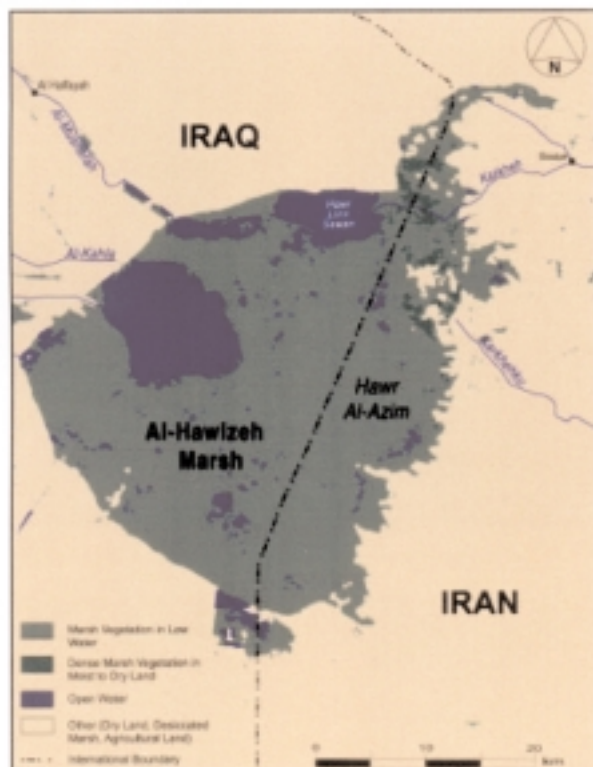
Studies, disclosed today at the 3rd World Water Forum taking place in Kyoto, Japan, indicate that of the 10 per cent of the marshlands left, one third has disappeared in the past two years with many endangered species such as the Sacred Ibis and African darter holding on at a knife's edge.

Two years have elapsed since the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) drew the world's attention to the plight of the marshlands and its unique culture, the Marsh Arabs who are the 5,000 year-old heirs of the Babylonians and Sumerians.

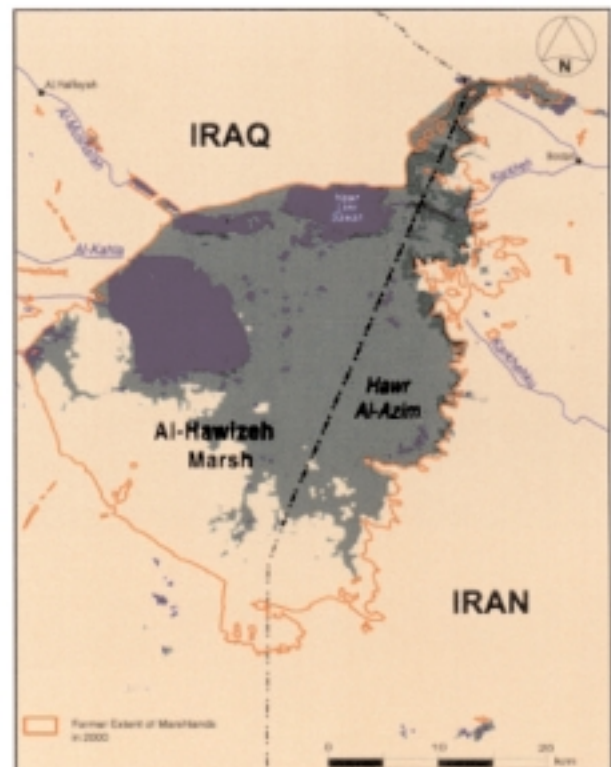
Satellite-based assessment studies, carried out by UNEP's Division of Early Warning and Assessment (DEWA-Europe/GRID-Geneva) and covering a period from the early 1970s to 2000, showed that 90 per cent of the marshlands, also home to rare and unique species and a spawning ground for Gulf fisheries, had



Vanishing Marshlands: 1973 - 2000



Mesopotamian marshlands in 2000



Mesopotamian marshlands in 2002

Hard facts: Analysis of Landsat satellite imagery shows that the surviving Mesopotamian marshlands declined by 30% from 1,084 square kilometers in 2000 to 759 square kilometers in 2002. At this rate of loss, the marshes are likely to totally vanish within the next three to five years.

disappeared.

The new studies show that a further 325 square kilometres have dried out since 2000 leaving just seven per cent of the original area. Unless urgent action is taken to reverse the trend and re-habilitate the marshlands, the entire wetland known as the Hawr Al-Hawizeh in Iraq and Hawr Al-Azim in Iran, are likely to have gone in three to five years.

Klaus Toepfer, Executive Director of UNEP who is attending the Forum, said: "As we mark World Water Day 2003, we are reminded again of the dramatic destruction of the Mesopotamian marshlands and their unique culture and wildlife over the past decade. It is an environmental catastrophe for this region and underscores the huge pressures facing wetlands and freshwater ecosystems across the world".

"We have already lost half of the world's wetlands in the last 100 years, and the continued desiccation of the Mesopotamian marshlands confirms that more decisive and concrete action is needed", he said.

Mr. Toepfer said he hoped that the end of hostilities in Iraq and the rehabilitation of the country would include a full assessment and action plan for the restoration of the marshes.

UNEP, which has successfully carried out environmental assessments and drawn up action plans for the Balkans and more recently Afghanistan and the Occupied Palestinian Territories, stood ready to assist in any project to restore the wetlands.

Mr. Toepfer said such an assessment needed to address all the issues which are potentially impacting on the marshes. These include extensive, internal drainage, projects and dams upstream including those on the Euphrates and Tigris rivers. UNEP believes there is still a last window of opportunity to reverse wetland desiccation and achieve at least partial restoration. In the short term, an emergency release of water from reservoir dams in Iran and Iraq to simulate the seasonal flood is needed.

Iran reacted positively with a limited release of water to the wetlands in March and April 2002 flooding the northern core part. A long-term recovery plan is however needed. This will require a holistic river basin approach based on the ultimate goal of sustaining riverine ecology and in which all Tigris-Euphrates riparian countries share the rivers' waters in a coordinated and equitable manner. An integrated catchment plan would also give priority to allocating an adequate amount of water to the wetlands, while water releases from existing dams can be timed to mimic natural flow patterns and bring the marshlands back to life.

Notes to Editors: The Mesopotamian marshlands are an integral part of the Tigris-Euphrates river basin, which is shared by Iran, Iraq, Syria and Turkey. UNEP first drew the world's attention to the demise of the largest wetland ecosystem in the Middle East Mesopotamian marshlands in May 2001 with hard evidence from satellite imagery capturing the shrinkage of the marshlands' physical extent. The UNEP study revealed that by spring 2000, a one thousand-square kilometre vestige straddling the Iran-Iraq border was all that was left of the extensive wetland complex, which originally covered an area of 15,000 - 20,000 square kilometres.

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