

World Heritage Push for Garden of Eden

Italy Backs Bid to List Iraqi Marshlands Following Completion of UNEP Restoration Project

Kyoto/Nairobi, 5 September 2008--A plan to list as a World Heritage Site an area known as the Fertile Crescent, and thought by some to be the location of the Biblical 'Garden of Eden', was unveiled today by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) in cooperation with the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO).

The initiative, to be supported by funding from the Government of Italy, aims to further the protection and conservation of a significant wetland of global cultural, natural and environmental importance.

The Marshlands, spawning grounds for Gulf fisheries and home to species like the Sacred Ibis, were almost totally drained and destroyed by the former Iraqi regime of Saddam Hussein during the 1990s and early 21st century.

Dams upstream on the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, which feed the fabled area, had also aggravated the decline. By 2002 the 9,000 square km of permanent wetlands had dwindled to just 760 square km.

UNEP estimated then that these wetlands would be completely lost within three to five years unless urgent action was taken.

The World Heritage management support plan, announced at the end of a meeting in Kyoto follows a four year, \$14 million UNEP project to restore the ecological viability of the site while bringing sustainable livelihoods to the Marsh Arabs.

The Marsh Arabs, the 5,000 year-old heirs of the Babylonians and the Sumerians, and their wetland home had been targeted by the former Iraqi government forcing an estimated 200,000 to 300,000 into exile or camps in and outside Iraq.

With the collapse of the Saddam Hussein government in mid-2003, local residents began breaking the drainage embankments and opening the floodgates to bring water back into the marshlands.

The UNEP marshland management project, which commenced in 2004 with funding from the UN Iraq Trust Fund, the Government of Japan, and the Government of Italy, has been working with the Iraqi environment ministry and local communities to accelerate improvements.

These include environmentally-friendly methods that are providing safe drinking water for up to 22,000 people, the planting of reed banks and beds as natural pollution and sewage filters and the introduction of renewable energies such as solar.

A Marshland Information Network has been established. Training in satellite and field monitoring and wetland restoration and management has also been part of project which today completed its final evaluation phase at the Kyoto meeting.

During this meeting, the Iraqi Ministry of Environment also requested UNEP to provide support for accession to multilateral environmental agreements (MEAs) in order to take part in the international environmental challenges but also opportunities facing the planet.

MEAs range from the Convention on Biological Diversity, the Montreal Protocol on Substances that Deplete the Ozone Layer to the Convention of Migratory Species and the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change.

Narmin Othman, the Iraqi Environment Minister who is in Japan for the event, said: 'I am very happy that we are now going to work towards making the Marshlands a National Park and a globally important World Heritage Site'.

"Because of what Saddam Hussein did, the Marshlands were in danger of completely disappearing as was the centuries-old culture of the Marsh Arabs. It had become an ecological but also a human tragedy," she said.

"Now we have 50 to 60 per cent of marshlands back we can look forward to further improvements and putting them on the map as Iraq's first mixed, natural and cultural World Heritage Site as befits an area of global significance," added Ms Othman.

Achim Steiner, UN Under-Secretary General and UNEP Executive Director, said: "I would like to thank the Governments of Japan and Italy for their support and congratulate the Iraqi people on these extraordinary achievements".

"The work in the Iraqi Marshlands may have been unique and challenging for a whole variety of reasons. But the lessons we have learnt go beyond Iraq's border. They provide a blue print for the restoration for the many other damaged, degraded and economically-important wetland ecosystems across the world," he added.

Mr Steiner said he looked forward to working with the Iraqi government and cooperating with UNESCO on developing a comprehensive management plan en route to securing a World Heritage Site listing and thanked the government of Italy for its invaluable support.

Chizuru Aoki of UNEP's International Environmental Technology Centre in Japan, which has been coordinating the project, said today that the Italian funds would be used to draw up and implement a sustainable preservation and management plan.

This will include pilot projects on community-wide ecosystem management and cultural preservation as well as capacity building, jointly with UNESCO and the Iraqi authorities.

According to UNESCO, the earliest that Iraq could envisage a submission to the World Heritage Committee might be 2010 which, if approved could see the Marshlands of Mesopotamia listed a World Heritage in 2011.

“It is essential that we continue to work with the Iraqi partners, UNESCO, as well as other relevant organizations to help Iraq move towards this goal,” Aoki said.

Notes to Editors

The Iraqi Marshland Project <http://marshlands.unep.or.jp/>

UNEP’s Post Conflict and Disaster Management Branch Iraq Reports

<http://postconflict.unep.ch/publications.php?prog=iraq>

Downloadable maps and images at www.unep.org

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