

Conservation knows no boundaries – as ties between Iraq and Norfolk show

Nature Iraq is repaying international support by donating to the Norfolk Wildlife Trust's appeal to buy land next to Cley Marshes



Richard Porter guardian.co.uk, Wednesday 24 October 2012 12.30 BST



Reflections -: Photograph: Richard Porter/Nature Iraq

The Mesopotamian Marshes, a vast expanse of reeds and open water twice the size of Norfolk, are the largest wetland ecosystem in the Middle East and support a number of species of global conservation concern. The marshes hold the only breeding population of the globally endangered Basra reed warbler and the world's highest wintering numbers of the threatened marbled duck.



A Basra reed warbler and its young. Photograph: Mudhafar Salim/Nature Iraq

Now the marshes are under threat again, this time from the building of huge dams in Turkey on the Tigris and Euphrates, the rivers that feed and nourish a wetland complex so important for biodiversity as well as being the homelands of the Marsh Arabs, made famous by the writings of Wilfred Thesiger. The charity [Nature Iraq](#) is actively campaigning to influence the building and use of these giant structures that can have such a devastating effect for the lives of people and wildlife.

Another NI major activity has been surveying more than 220 sites throughout Iraq to identify the country's key areas for biodiversity. Often in difficult and very dangerous circumstance these surveys by young NI biologists have spanned seven years, summer and winter, and are the first step towards establishing a network of protected areas. This is wonderful conservation work from a country where the daily news is rarely uplifting. They have already produced their own bird field guide – in Arabic – the first Middle East country to do so.

But it's not just conservation in Iraq that is NI's motivation. It may surprise many that this NGO has just made a [donation of \\$1,000](#) to the [Norfolk Wildlife Trust's £1m appeal](#) to purchase 143 acres of land next to Cley Marshes on England's North Norfolk coast. Nature Iraq has received much help from colleagues in the UK, especially through

BirdLife International, and makes this donation as an act of global support for the protection of marshes everywhere.



Construction of a 'mudhief' (reed house). Photograph: Mudhafar Salim/Nature Iraq

[Dr Azzam Alwash](#), the president of NI, who was instrumental in the programme of re-flooding the Mesopotamian Marshes after years of drainage under the Saddam regime and has stayed in Cley village during visits to England, explains the reasoning behind the donation: "Nature Iraq has received great support from international organisations for the conservation of our famous Mesopotamian Marshes. This small token to support the extension of Cley Marshes is to honour that support and show our brotherly care for the environment everywhere."



Iraq's first bird book. Photograph: Richard Porter/Nature Iraq

He later tells me: "Wetlands are under attack worldwide and we need to draw parallels between the reedbeds of Cley and the marshes of Iraq. Those who are fighting the good fight need to help each other and learn from each other. Nature Iraq made the donation not only as a gesture of goodwill to wetland enthusiasts in the UK, but also in the hope of raising the profile of the marshes of Iraq within the community that loves wetlands, as we all need to work together to help pressure the Iraqi government, as well as the Turkish government and the Iranian government, to do the right thing and make sure that the marshes of Iraq survive the era of dam building and climate change."



Boat traffic in the Iraq marshes. Photograph: Omar Fadhi/Nature Iraq

On the newly acquired land, the Norfolk Wildlife Trust will create more reed beds, grazing marsh and freshwater for marsh harriers, bitterns, bearded tits, otters, water voles and avocets which live at Cley Marshes; for the countless thousands of migratory birds which use it; and for the

100,000 people who visit each year – and for whom a new centre is to be built – the [Simon Aspinall Education Centre](#), after the Middle East naturalist who lived in Cley.

Encouraged by the NWT education endeavours and those of the RSPB, Nature Iraq is embarking on an exciting new programme to encourage Iraqi visitors to the Mesopotamian Marshes to witness the wonders of this national and global treasure. "If we can replicate some of the actions done by conservation bodies in Britain to make people appreciate wildlife, I will be a very happy man," Azzam said.