



United Nations Environment Programme

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PROGRAMME DES NATIONS UNIES POUR L'ENVIRONNEMENT • PROGRAMA DE LAS NACIONES UNIDAS PARA EL MEDIO AMBIENTE
ПРОГРАММА ОРГАНИЗАЦИИ ОБЪЕДИНЕННЫХ НАЦИЙ ПО ОКРУЖАЮЩЕЙ СРЕДЕ

PRESS RELEASE

UNEP names pilot projects for Marshlands restoration and clean water provision in Southern Iraq

New York, 20 April 2005 – The goal of restoring the environment and providing clean water and sanitation services to some 85,000 people living in the marshlands of southern Iraq moved a step closer today.

At six pilot project sites in *Thi-Qar*, *Basrah*, and *Missan* governorates, it was announced that environmentally sound technologies (ESTs) will be implemented on a pilot basis to see how they perform in bringing drinking water, sanitation systems and wetland management skills to local people and communities.

The “low tech” less polluting ESTs used will include restoration of reed beds and other marshland habitats that act as natural, water-filtration systems.

Considered suitable from a technical and social perspective, the pilot sites were selected by Iraqi ministries and the Marsh Arab Forum, in consultation with UNEP. The locations are *Al-Kirmashiya*, *Badir Al-Rumaidh*, *Al-Masahab*, *Al-Jeweber*, *Al-Hadam* and *Al-Sewelmat*.

The news from the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) marshlands project, funded by the Government of Japan, was presented to participants at an Italian government sponsored meeting on the marshlands, held in the margins of the 13th session of the UN Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD) in New York.

The selection of the sites, the resulting on the ground activities and the wider application of the ESTs in the region, is a key stage in the implementation of UNEP's multi-million dollar project to restore the Marshlands of Mesopotamia.

The Iraqi Marshlands, considered by some to be the location of the Biblical Garden of Eden, were massively damaged in the late 20th Century, partly as a result of new dams on the Tigris and Eurphrates river systems and partly as a result of massive drainage operations by the previous Iraqi regime.

In 2001, UNEP alerted the world to their plight when it released satellite images showing that 90 per cent of these fabled wetlands, home to rare and unique species like the Sacred Ibis and a spawning ground for Gulf fisheries, had been lost.

Further studies, released in 2003, showed that an additional three per cent or 325 square kilometres had gone. Experts feared that the entire wetlands, home to a 5,000 year-old civilisation could disappear entirely by 2008. With the collapse of the former Iraqi regime in mid-2003, local residents began opening floodgates and breaching embankments in order to bring water back into the marshlands.

“The challenge now is to restore the environment and provide clean water and sanitation services to the up to 85,000 people living there,” said Monique Barbut, Director of UNEP’s Division of Technology, Industry and Economics (DTIE), which is carrying out the \$11 million project.

Other project activities include the establishment of a Marshland Information Network, an Internet-based system that allows those with an interest in the region to share their ideas and strategies. An Arabic version of UNEP’s Environmentally Sound Technology Information System (ESTIS) serves as the basis for the network.

Furthermore, a satellite-based observation system for marshland monitoring is now operational, and regular real-time reports will soon be available.

The project is also helping to train the Iraqi authorities, both at national government and local levels. To date approximately 160 Iraqi experts have been trained in wetland management and restoration, remote sensing analysis and community-based resource management.

Several other governments and non-governmental organizations are involved in the Iraqi Marshlands. The UNEP project is strengthening the coordination of these various efforts to ensure maximum benefit for the people and local environment.

To this end, UNEP is playing a key role in the development of a master plan for the restoration and development of the marshlands, the focus of the side-event that was held here at the CSD in New York today.

The UNEP project, “Support for Environmental Management of the Iraqi Marshlands”, is implemented through DTIE’s office in Japan, the International Environmental Technology Centre.

Information about the project is available at: <http://marshlands.unep.or.jp/>

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