



NATURE



Press Contact:
Donald Lee, WNET.ORG
212.560.3005, LeeD@wnet.org

Press Materials: pbs.org/pressroom or thirteen.org/pressroom

THIRTEEN's *Nature* follows one man's mission to restore the Mesopotamian Marshes destroyed by Saddam Hussein in *Braving Iraq*, November 7, 2010 on PBS

Connect to *Nature* on Facebook and watch episodes online at pbs.org/nature.

In the early 1990's, Saddam Hussein committed one of the greatest ecocides of the 20th Century. He drained the great Mesopotamian Marshes in an attempt to eradicate the indigenous Marsh Arabs when they rebelled against him. The richest wetland habitat in the Middle East, believed by many religious scholars to be the original Garden of Eden, was strategically reduced to miles of scorched earth and was thought to have been destroyed forever. As the region turned to dust, the interdependent communities of people and wildlife were virtually wiped out. But one man is on a mission to restore this precious ecosystem, against all odds, and two filmmakers are determined to tell his story. In the middle of a war-torn nation where chaos and violence are part of everyday life, convoys of armed guards protect filmmaker David Johnson and cameraman Steve Foote as they follow eco-visionary Azzam Alwash in *Braving Iraq*, premiering Sunday, November 7 at 8 p.m. (ET) on PBS (check local listings). Alwash hopes his restoration program will offer a new perspective on Iraq and make it possible for people and wildlife to live in harmony once again in one of the most politically troubled and dangerous places on Earth.

After broadcast, the program will be available for viewing at *Nature Online* www.pbs.org/nature.

Currently in its 29th Season, *Nature* is a production of THIRTEEN in association with WNET.ORG – one of America's most prolific and respected public media providers.

“The making of *Braving Iraq* has been unlike any other film on *Nature*,” says Fred Kaufman, Series Executive Producer. “Our filmmakers had to take extreme security measures in order to document this critical story in Iraq that few people know about. It’s rewarding to be able to show the transformation of an environmental catastrophe into an ecological rebirth in a country known for its challenges instead of its successes.”

Johnson says, “We had an opportunity here to make a film about a hidden part of Iraq... a part of the world that just doesn’t get a lot of positive press.” Foote adds, “And at the end of the day this film is not about the bang, bang, it’s about the tweet, tweet.”

Situated in Southern Iraq between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers, the Mesopotamian Marshes were a thriving habitat that served as a breeding ground and sanctuary for millions of native and migrating birds passing through from Eurasia to Africa, including great white pelicans, Dead Sea sparrows, the endangered marbled teal and the rare Basra reed warblers, unique to the marshes. Like the wide array of wildlife, the people living in the marshes also relied on the riches of the wetlands. The Marsh Arabs used the versatile reeds as building material, food for their livestock, and fuel. Sadly, all that biodiversity vanished when Saddam choked the lifeblood from the marshlands by constructing enormous embankments to reroute the rivers. The marshes, once more than twice as big as the Everglades, were reduced to a fraction of their original size and could no longer sustain their inhabitants.

After the fall of Saddam’s regime and in the midst of a civil war, Alwash, an Iraqi exile who had settled in the U.S., returned to his home country to spearhead efforts to recreate the marshes he remembered so well from his childhood. His hope is that his work will allow the Marsh Arabs to come home and reestablish their lives there. And his greater goal, once the environment is restored, is to reintroduce Iraq to the world as a wildlife haven.

In 2003, Alwash’s team began to excavate the embankments and re-flood the marshes. Amazingly, nature returned. The seeds of the reed beds miraculously survived nearly a decade of drought and sprang back to life with the fresh flow of water. Birds and fish began to repopulate the region. Cameras caught an unprecedented sighting of a huge flock of threatened marbled teal, not seen in the area for two decades. Kingfishers and cormorants, eagles and pelicans arrived, as well. But the real hope was to find a Basra reed warbler, which breeds here and virtually nowhere else.

The project has not been without its setbacks. In recent years, a long drought and excessive dam constructions have disrupted the cycle of spring floods and undermined the restoration progress. In effect, the lack of fresh water increased the salinity of the marshes, causing stagnation and pollution. Not to be deterred, Alwash and his team came up with an innovative way to create a mechanical flood pulse to re-hydrate the marshes. Although not a permanent solution, it has halted the drying of the wetlands. And happily, the drought did not deter the Basra reed warbler, which returned to breed in the marshes, despite all difficulties. Its presence is a sure indication of the rehabilitation’s success.

Since 2004, Alwash’s conservation organization, Nature Iraq, has been working steadfastly to educate the public and to promote the cause of the marshes and the Marsh Arabs. In the

future, he plans to establish Iraq's first National Park in the Central Marshes as an eco-tourist destination. Alwash's dream may be a far cry from the current reality of Iraq. Looming tension arising from the inconclusive election results in March 2010 could easily halt any headway made by his organization. But Alwash maintains his positive outlook. He believes "If we can restore [the marshes], Iraq can be restored too."

Nature's *Braving Iraq* is a production of Aqua Vita Films, THIRTEEN and the BBC in association with WNET.ORG. Available in HD. **Nature** is a production of THIRTEEN in association with WNET.ORG for PBS. Fred Kaufman is Executive Producer. William Grant is Executive-in-Charge. Major corporate support for **Nature** is provided by Canon U.S.A., Inc. Additional support is provided by the Lillian Goldman Charitable Trust, by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, and by the nation's public television stations.

Nature has won nearly 600 honors from the television industry, the international wildlife film communities, and environmental organizations – including 10 Emmys, three Peabodys and the first award given to a television program by the Sierra Club. Most recently, the series won a Peabody Award for *Silence of the Bees* and received an Emmy nomination for *Victoria Falls*.

Nature Online (pbs.org/nature) is the award-winning web companion to the broadcast series and is spearheading **Nature's** distribution to new media platforms. At **Nature Online**, visitors can stream full episodes of **Nature** programs, watch behind-the-scenes video exclusives with filmmakers and producers (also available at iTunes), view program excerpts (also available on YouTube), and find fun interactive content, teacher lesson plans, and more. Join **Nature** on Facebook (Facebook.com/PBSNature) and follow the series on Twitter (Twitter.com/PBSNature) to keep up with the latest videos, photos, program alerts and more.

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