

The 2021 Marjan Marsh Award has been given to Iraqi conservationist, Ahmed Saleh Neema, who lives with his family in the historic town of Amara.

The Marjan-Marsh Award is organised by The Marjan Centre in the Department of War Studies in partnership with the Marsh Christian Trust: this award is given annually to someone or group that has made an invaluable contribution to an area where conflict and conservation overlap and is in its ninth year (please see Note One below).

Ahmed Saleh Neema has been active in protecting all biodiversity connected to Iraq's central marshes (locally called Al-Kahla) for the last decade when he changed from being a hunter to a protector; this is his full-time work having previously been employed at the Missan University's Faculty of Administration and Economics in Amara.

The marshes were heavily drained by Saddam Hussein not only to increase agriculture but also because the Marsh Arabs, The Ma'dan, were sworn enemies of his regime largely on account of their Shiite religion making them closer to Iran and being separate: they lived traditionally in reed-houses on artificial islands amid the waters of the marshes, living by fishing, herding buffalo, cultivating rice and selling reed-mats.

Saddam's engineers diverted almost the entire flow of the Euphrates into a large drainage canal, known as the Third River, which was connected to the sea; the Ma'dan armed opposition to Saddam was brutally put down in a series of tactical operations focused on Amara, displacing thousands of people.

Ahmed's conversion was stimulated by the plight of the Maxwell's Otter which had become virtually extinct (please see Note Two below) due to fur-trappers and the draining of the marshes; Ahmed was instrumental in the return of the otter (called 'water-dog' in Arabic) to the marshes on a small-scale, releasing six that he raised himself.

Ahmed is also actively engaged with stopping poaching of migratory birds which he reports to the Environmental Police; his other focus is restoring both rare aquatic plants and fish populations that have been heavily reduced because of the extensive drainage.

Ahmed says: 'my environmental activity is due to my faith in the necessity of serving Nature'

**Note One:** The Marsh Christian Trust: started in 1981 by businessman Brian Marsh to honour 'unsung heroes', and since then the portfolio of awards has grown to over 70 across a wide spectrum that includes conservation, arts, heritage and social welfare.

**Note Two:** Maxwell's Otter: famous adventurer and author, Gavin Maxwell, wrote *Ring of Bright Water* in 1956 about how he brought a smooth-coated otter back from Iraq to his home "Camusfearna" on the west coast of Scotland; the otter later died in tragic circumstances after Maxwell and the otter, named 'Mijbil', had formed a close bond. Maxwell took 'Mijbil' to the London Zoological Society where it was decided that this was a previously unknown sub-species of smooth-coated otters and was named *Lutrogale perspicillata maxwelli* - 'Maxwell's Otter'.

While the Maxwell's Otter was thought to have become extinct in the marshes of Iraq due to the large-scale drainage of the area as well as poaching, it is distributed throughout the rest of the Middle East. *Ring of Bright Water* was made into a popular film, starring Virginia McKenna and Bill Travers.