



REPORT ON A RAMSAR TEAM VISIT TO THE HAWIZEH MARSH RAMSAR SITE, IRAQ

14 to 16 February, 2014



Compiled by
Clayton Rubec, Centre for Environmental Stewardship and Conservation rubec@rogers.com,
and Lew Young, Secretariat of the Convention on Wetlands young@ramsar.org

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Summary

The Hawizeh Marsh forms part of the Mesopotamian Marshes, which is the largest wetland in the region and is of international importance for historical, cultural and environmental reasons. In 2007, the site was placed on the List of Wetlands of International Importance ('Ramsar Site') as part of the procedure for the accession of Iraq to the Convention on Wetlands ('Ramsar Convention').

In June 2010, the Government of Iraq added the Hawizeh Marsh to the Montreux Record of Ramsar Sites with ongoing or expected changes in ecological character, due to the drying conditions which the site was facing. In August 2011, the Government of Iraq invited the Secretariat of the Convention on Wetlands to form a team of experts to visit the Hawizeh Marshes to review the degradation that had taken place and recommend solutions. A two-person team was formed and the visit was organized from 14 to 16 February, 2014 by the Center for Restoration of Iraqi Marshes and Wetlands (CRIMW) of the Iraq Ministry of Water Resources, which is the Administrative Authority for the Convention in Iraq.

The team visited the northern and southern parts of the Marsh, as well as the Central Marsh and Hammar Marsh that also make up the Mesopotamian Marshes complex. They met a range of national and governorate government officials representing a range of ministries covering water resources, oil, environment, agriculture, and science and technology. They also met leaders of villages in the northern area of the Hawizeh Marsh and with representatives of Shell Iraq Petroleum Development BV, which has a concession area in the southern part of the marsh which overlaps the boundary of the Ramsar Site.

The Hawizeh Marsh is facing a complex range of site-specific, basin-wide and national threats, many of which have been well documented by studies and projects in the past decade. The main threat is the decreasing input of water, primarily due to the construction of upstream water control structures in the river basin that feeds the marsh, and to declining rainfall. In addition, there are emerging threats, including from oil production around and within the marsh itself. These threats are compounded by the insufficient communication and cooperation between the different national government ministries, and between the national ministries and governorate departments. There also appears to be insufficient communication between the ministries and companies involved in oil production and with CRIMW and the Ministry of Water Resources, who are responsible for the conservation and wise use of the Hawizeh Marsh Ramsar Site under the Convention on Wetlands.

Local village communities should also be more involved in site management. However, this situation is improving.

It would have been too ambitious for the Ramsar team to try to address all of these threats, and so it focused on the threats at the site level which can potentially be addressed in the short term by actions resulting in long-term benefits. These actions include:

- Improving communication between the different stakeholder groups by establishing:
 - a site-level working group for the Hawizeh Marsh involving CRIMW, the relevant departments from the three governorates that share the marsh, and local community representatives;
 - a regular communication channel between CRIMW, South Oil Company and other oil companies operating around the marsh. A mechanism also needs to be developed to allow CRIMW to be involved in the environmental impact assessment and other processes for monitoring the operation of the oil sector within the Mesopotamian Marshes;

- an effective national working group with representatives of CRIMW and ministries covering relevant issues such as environment, oil, education, and science and technology. We understand that there is already such a working group but it has not met for some time because of disagreement over which government agency should have responsibility for the Convention on Wetlands. The Ramsar team hopes that this issue can be resolved as soon as possible so that the working group can function again.
- Taking concrete steps to implement the *Management Plan for the Hawizeh Marsh* (2008) and the *Operational Program to Facilitate the Start-up of the Hawizeh Marsh Ramsar Site* (2010).

1. Introduction

In January 2014, the Center for Restoration of Iraqi Marshes and Wetlands (CRIMW) of the Iraq Ministry of Water Resources (MOWR) invited the Ramsar Secretariat to establish a Ramsar Advisory Mission (RAM) to review the status of the ecological character of the Hawizeh Marsh Ramsar Site in Iraq. This site was designated by Iraq in 2007 as part of its accession as a Contracting Party to the Convention on Wetlands, but in 2010 the Government of Iraq requested that the Site be added to the Montreux List of Ramsar Sites with ongoing or expected changes in ecological character.

In August 2011, the Government of Iraq wrote to the Secretariat of the Convention to invite ‘...a number of experts to examine and assist the current Iraq Marshes state, preview the biodiversity degradation at wetlands and provide practical recommendations for the purpose of documenting, publishing and posting on the website of Ramsar Convention on Wetlands, as a sample of the risks that threaten the wetlands’.

The Secretariat considered the complex issues facing the Site, developed a list of potential RAM members and reviewed short-term planning limitations. It determined that a preliminary visit by a Ramsar team would help to identify the detailed objectives of the RAM. This trip would be the first visit to Iraq by a team from the Ramsar Secretariat, which had previously been limited by security issues in the country, and would provide information to determine the timing and focus of a RAM at a later date. In consultation with the MOWR, this preliminary trip was approved. Lew Young (Senior Regional Advisor for Asia-Oceania, Ramsar Secretariat) and Clayton Rubec (invited Ramsar specialist and policy expert from Canada) visited Basra, Iraq from 13 to 17 February 2014. The Government of Iraq generously provided financial support for the trip. This report summarizes the work carried out during the trip and includes observations and recommendations.



Life in the Hawizeh Marsh (L. Young)

The central purpose of the trip was to “hold meetings with relevant experts to assess the drying conditions that have affected the Ramsar Site for several years and the impact these conditions are having on the ecology and biodiversity of the Site and relative contributions this makes to dust-storm conditions in the region”.

The Secretariat has previously organized RAMs for various Ramsar Sites at the invitation of other Contracting Parties. In many cases, the issues are more limited, but not easier to address. Examples have included defining follow-up actions for Sites affected by coastal ocean impacts, floods, fire and

major storms such as cyclones and hurricanes. However, the Ramsar team realized before travelling to Iraq that an unusually wide range of issues seem to stand in the way of progress towards the long-term wise use of the Site. Without refining the focus of a future RAM, the team was concerned that little progress would be possible.

2. Programme of the visit

A detailed programme of field visits and meetings (see Annex 1) was organized by CRIMW, led by the Director General Mr. Hani Fakhri Naji, and his deputy Ms. Sameerah Abed. These included:

- Field visits to:
 - the northern part of the Hawizeh Marsh (14 February). This involved a boat trip into the Um Al-Naej Marsh, from Abu Khasaf Marsh. A lunch meeting with local village leaders was also arranged;
 - the southern part of the Hawizeh Marsh close to the border of the I.R. Iran, from where the oil field in Iran could be seen (15 February). There was also an opportunity to visit the Assafia Park established in 2005 by the Department of Agriculture (Basra Governorate) but which dried out in 2010/2011;
 - parts of the recently established Central Marshes National Park at Chebayish, including sections of the Hammar Marsh (16 February). A meeting with local community leaders was held in a *mudhif* (reed house) in the town of Chebayish followed by a boat trip into the Central Marsh National Park. MOWR water-control structures and a weir built in this area were also visited, to examine efforts to manage water levels in the marsh.
 - the archeological site of the ancient city of Ur, which was significant as a city state lying within a large wetland basin around 4,000 B.C. This highlighted the importance of re-establishing tourism ventures in Iraq;
- A visit on 15 February to the Royal Dutch Shell oil field concession at Majnoon with Shell senior staff and a meeting at their headquarters nearby;
- Two evening meetings with representatives of Basra Governorate Departments such as Water Resources, Environment, Science and Technology, and Agriculture, of NGOs including Nature Iraq, of the National Center for Resource Management, and of the government-owned South Oil Company. Some of these officials were also meeting in Basra from February 15 to 16 concerning water management issues facing the Basra area;



A selection of the team members visiting the Hawizeh Marsh (L. Young)

Throughout the visit, the Ramsar team was accompanied by representatives of CRIMW, the Ministry MOWR, Ministry of Oil, Ministry of Science and Technology, the Council of Advisors of the Office of the Prime Minister, and Nature Iraq. This allowed for more informal discussion of various issues.



Local villagers by the Um Al-Naej Marsh (C. Rubec)

3. General Observations

3.1 Regional water management issues

3.1.1 Background

The Mesopotamian Marshes in southern Iraq originally covered some 20,000 square kilometres (two million hectares) and is made up of three main areas: the Central Marsh, the Hammar Marsh to the west, and the Hawizeh Marsh to the east. Water mainly flows into the marshes from rainfall and from the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers. Both of these are transboundary rivers, with the Tigris receiving water from Turkey (59%), Iraq (32%) and Iran (9%), and the Euphrates receiving water from Turkey (88%), Syria (9%) and from rain and wadi (intermittent streams) in Iraq (3%).

The history of the marshes and its management has been well documented in reports from various projects since the early 2000s (Annex 3). During the visit, officials informed the Ramsar team that the water level in the marshes was currently unusually high due to greater than average rainfall in 2013. Baghdad, for example, had received 200mm of rain compared with an annual average of 140mm.

The Hawizeh Marsh is transboundary, being shared by Iraq and Iran. It receives some 40% to 50% of its water from the Karkheh River on the Iranian side of the marsh, and the rest of the inflow is from the Al-Musharah and Al-Kahla'a rivers on the Iraqi side. On the Iranian side, the marsh is known as the Haur Al-Azim.

The Hawizeh Marsh is more ecologically intact than the Central Marsh and the Hammar Marsh. This is because, when the marshes were drained in the 1980s and 1990s by the government of the time, the Hawizeh did not dry out completely because of the input of water from the Karkheh River in Iran.

The Hawizeh Marsh was Listed as a Wetland of International Importance (or 'Ramsar Site') in 2007 as part of the process for the accession of Iraq to the Convention on Wetlands. CRIMW is now preparing for the designation of the Central and Hammar Marshes as Ramsar Sites. In July 2013, the Iraqi Council of Ministers declared the Central Marsh as the country's first National Park.

3.1.2 Flow of water from Turkey into the Mesopotamian Marshes

The main threat to the Mesopotamian Marshes today is the reduction in inflow of water due to the construction of upstream dams and other structures. One of these projects with the greatest expected impact is the Ilisu Dam in Turkey which forms part of the Southeastern Anatolian Project ('GAP' in Turkish). The dam will create an 11 billion m³ reservoir with a surface area of 31 km², and will generate some 2% of Turkey's electricity supply. The dam reportedly could halve the amount of water Iraq receives from the Tigris River, affecting some 670,000 hectares of arable land and leaving the Mesopotamian Marshes dry. The dam is also causing controversy in Turkey, because it would flood historically important towns such as Hasankeyf.

Negotiations on the issue of water sharing between Turkey and Iraq have so far been difficult but reaching a solution is not impossible. Both sides have a common responsibility to ensure the integrated management of their common water resources in the Tigris and Euphrates River Basin for the benefit of their people and the environment. Failure to do so would lead to dangers and threats that will not stop at national borders but will be transboundary. More discussions on water sharing are needed based on an economic model that both sides can agree upon. This may involve the sale of gas from Iraq to Turkey, and electricity from Turkey to Iraq. A breakthrough on agreement to allow more water to flow from Turkey down the Tigris and Euphrates will be vital to the future survival of the Mesopotamian Marshes, especially to the Central and Hammar Marshes.



Scene from a village adjacent to the Hawizeh Marsh (L. Young)

3.1.3 Flow of water from I.R. Iran into the Hawizeh Marsh

In 2001, a dam was built in Iran across the Karkheh River, which flows into the Hawizeh Marsh/Haur Al-Azim and in the early 2000's, construction of a dyke began along the border between Iraq and Iran that runs through the marsh. The dyke was completed in 2009 and is reported to be at 6m level tall. The dyke is said to have reduced the flow from the Iranian side of the marsh from 5 million m³/year

(before 1990), to 2.2 million m³/year at present because after Karkheh River stopped feeding the marsh completely and also because of the scarcity of water resources in the region.

The completion of the dyke has effectively divided the marsh along the boundary of Iraq and Iran, separating the Hawizeh Marsh and the Haur Al-Azim. As a result, the Hawizeh now mainly depends on rainfall as well as water from the Al-Musharah and Al-Kahla'a rivers. There is a weir along a section of the dyke that allows water to overflow from Iran to Iraq when the level is high in the Haur Al-Azim but this probably only makes a small and irregular contribution to the overall water flow into the Hawizeh. There is also concern that water from the Iranian side contains pollutants, especially cadmium, from the oil developments around the Haur Al-Azim.

3.1.4 Downstream stakeholders

Whilst much attention has been on the reduction in water flow into the Mesopotamian Marshes and the impact that this has on the marshes and its people, it also needs to be recognized that the water does not stop at the marshes but eventually flows into the Shatt-al-Arab waterway and then into the Gulf. A knock-on effect of the result of the drying of the marshes is that there is less freshwater entering the Gulf, which as a result is becoming increasingly saline. The increasing pollution of the Shatt-al-Arab, for example with agricultural runoff also affects the Gulf and its fisheries. A truly integrated river basin scale approach is needed to understand the impact of changes in the hydrology of the Tigris and Euphrates river basins on the people and the environment, from the sources to the Gulf.



Meeting inside a *mudhif* reed house (L. Young)

3.2 National water management issues

3.2.1 *Strategy for Water and Land Resources of Iraq (SWLRI)*

The MOWR is currently engaged in Phase 2 of the 'Strategy for Water and Land Resources of Iraq' (SWLRI) which aims to establish a long-term institutional arrangement for Iraq's water sector using the principles of Integrated Water Resources Management (IWRM). The project's website explained that the project first tried to gather robust data on the current state of the country's water resources

system and the requirements of sectors such as water supply, flood control, power generation and the environment. It then developed different scenarios for decision makers on future water use and management options based on supply-side and demand-side measures, changes in land use and the establishment of transboundary agreements between Iraq and upstream countries. The results of the study, which are to be published in April 2014, will be important in determining the future management of the Mesopotamian Marshes and especially the Hawizeh Marsh Ramsar Site.

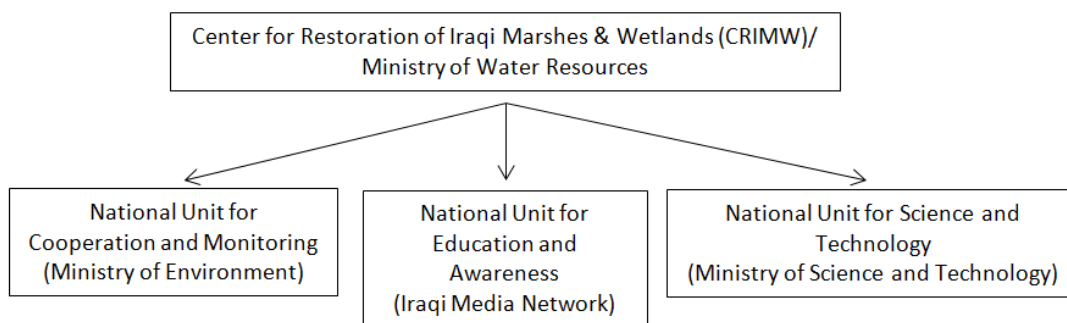
During the visit, it was explained to the Ramsar team that a high-level committee deals with water issues; it is led by the Prime Minister and includes Ministers from relevant ministries covering water resources, agriculture, environment, defense and foreign affairs. This committee meets every three or four months and has already met five times.

3.2.2 Organization of wetland management in Iraq

Three units are currently working with CRIMW to implement the Convention on Wetlands in Iraq:

- The Ministry of Environment (MOE) is responsible for National Unit for Cooperation and Monitoring. This includes tracking the status of wetlands throughout Iraq. In 2013, it cooperated with MOWR on a study of the biodiversity and social-economic situation of the local communities. MOE is also taking the lead for a proposed listing of the Mesopotamian Marshes, including the Hawizeh Marsh Ramsar Site, the Central Marshes National Park, East Hammar and West Hammar as a World Heritage Site.
- The National Unit for Education and Awareness is responsible for education and awareness of wetlands in the country and involves particularly the Iraqi Media Network.
- The Ministry of Science and Technology is responsible for the National Unit for Science and Technology and for links with all the government and non-government research centres and universities.

Bodies implementing the Convention on Wetlands in Iraq



CRIMW approves the budget for the annual programmes that each of the three Units conducts, and also has created a mechanism to hold regular meetings with the different units. However, no meetings have occurred since 2013 due to a lack of clarity in the respective roles and responsibilities of MOE and MOWR for wetland conservation in the country. This has affected their relationship nationally but at the governorate level, there appears to be good cooperation between the two ministries. It is hoped that the issue can be clarified through referral to the Office of the Prime Minister but no date for a decision has yet been determined. In July 2014, the Ministry of

Environment and Ministry of Water Resources took the initiative and held a successful meeting where they agreed on a plan for collaboration and coordination. This plan includes a cluster of activities with other stakeholders especially on developing a management plan for the marshes of southern Iraq that have been nominated as a World Heritage Site.

The conservation community, including the Ramsar secretariat, welcomed this new spirit of cooperation as it is essential for the future of the Mesopotamian Marshes. To build on this spirit of cooperation, the Ramsar team recommends that MOWR circulate the Ramsar National Report for COP12 and other relevant national-level wetland conservation documents that may arise (such as this Ramsar Mission Report). These documents should go to relevant ministries and stakeholders for their input, as a sign of cooperation and to ensure that such documents can be truly representative of the status of implementation of the Ramsar Convention in Iraq and the many stakeholders involved. It is hoped that the process of drafting the Ramsar National Report will also help to promote greater cooperation between stakeholders.

3.3 Governorate-level and site-level management issues

3.3.1 *Communication and cooperation between the governorates*

The Hawizeh Marsh covers part of three governorates: Basra, Misan and Amara. On the evening of 14 February, the Ramsar team met representatives of these governorates and of related ministries, academics and NGOs. This was the first such meeting since the designation of the Hawizeh Marsh as a Ramsar Site in 2007, and the discussions showed the level of misunderstanding that had built up between the different groups over the years. This covered:

- The unequal sharing of the water of the Hawizeh Marsh between the three governorates and the level of support from central government in resolving this dispute;
- The right of the oil sector to drain an area of the marsh for oil exploration and production (such as Majnoon oil fields), which was defined by unclear wording in 30-year-old legislation;
- Whether the agricultural section of Basra Governorate carried out sufficient consultation in the early 2000s when they designated the Assafia Wildlife Park, which lies within the Hawizeh Marsh;
- The impact of the oil industry, and for example its construction of oil and gas pipelines from Majnoon for export;
- The lack of involvement of the local governments in discussions between Iraq and Iran over the Haur Al-Hawizeh and water sharing.

Despite these issues, the participants agreed that such meetings were important to share information and opinions, to resolve any conflicts, and to develop future strategies for the Hawizeh Marsh. As a result, the Ramsar team recommends that a mechanism be set up to allow such meetings to be held on a regular basis in future.



The southern Hawizeh Marsh (L. Young)

3.3.2 Local communities around the northern Hawizeh Marsh

Historically, the communities living around the Hawizeh Marsh and Haur Al-Azim used to travel and communicate with each other on a regular basis. Through these social interactions and marriages, the people developed a similar culture and language (Arabic), and the region was reportedly called 'Arabstan'. However, the social connections began to break down in the 1980s and 1990s with the draining of the marsh in Iraq. People began to move out of the marshes and of the eight villages on the Hawizeh side of the marsh, only five now remain. These connections were further eroded by the completion of the dyke across the marsh in 2009, separating the Hawizeh Marsh and Haur Al-Azim.

On 14 February, the Ramsar team visited the village of Abu Kassaf on the north-western side of the Hawizeh Marsh, and made a boat trip from there into the Umm an Ni'aj marsh, which is some seven or eight metres deep.

The fishing industry in the Mesopotamian Marshes supplies some 60% of the fish consumed throughout Iraq. In the Hawizeh, many of the villagers are fishermen and are said to earn up to USD90/day from fisheries, and so there is little incentive to move to the cities to find work. However, the diversity of fish in the Hawizeh is declining and the Ministry of Agriculture now imposes a two-month fishing ban in the marsh each year starting from 15 February.



(L. Young)

Rice farming is also practiced around the Hawizeh, with a species locally called Amb'r traditionally grown until the 1960s, when American rice was introduced. However, this is less tolerant to the more saline water condition that now exists in the marsh. Ambr'r can also fetch a higher price in the market.

In terms of threats, the water close to the dyke dividing the marsh is reported to be polluted, particularly with cadmium that is believed to have seeped from the petroleum industry installations on the Iranian side of the border. Overall, the water quality of the marsh depends upon the amount of inflow during the wet season, with quality being better in wet years.

Other issues include the concerns expressed by local village leaders and elders that their villages are not adequately engaged in the oil field development process; are not receiving a significant share of local job opportunities; and their views on issues facing Hawizeh Marsh are not being well considered. These problems may be partly resolved by a new two-year study of the needs of the

local communities in all the three marsh areas about to be initiated by CRIMW, which will provide information for a 25-year development plan. However, the Ramsar team also recommends the creation of a 'Hawizeh Marsh Stakeholders' Group' involving local villagers who can meet on a regular basis in order to increase local participation and support.

3.3.3 Oil production in and around the Hawizeh Marsh



Meeting between Mr. Tom Hoof (Shell, left) and Mr. Hani Fakri (CRIMW, right) (L. Young)

In January 2010, the Ministry of Oil granted Royal Dutch Shell a 45% stake in the Majnoon Oil Fields that overlap the southern boundary of the Hawizeh Marsh Ramsar Site. In 2013, Shell began production from the southern part of this concession area, which has been drained and lies outside the Ramsar Site. In 2014, seismic exploration began in the northern part of the concession area, in an area within the Ramsar Site which is still flooded. An environmental impact assessment has begun here to review the possible impacts of oil production.

On 15 February, the Ramsar team visited the concession area and met senior Shell staff at their offices nearby. The meeting was very productive but disappointingly short. Shell provided presentations on flood risk assessment for their existing infrastructure in the oil field, and on the processes for seismic testing, site infrastructure construction, safety measures and environmental awareness mainly in the southern part of the concession area. Unfortunately, there was insufficient time for discussion of the development of the northern part of the concession area, which is of greater concern because it lies within the Hawizeh Marsh Ramsar Site. From the limited information that was provided, it appears that the Field Development Plan may be signed in the coming two months with drilling to commence in 2016. There would be 15 floating platforms each measuring 1km by 0.5km.

Shell has signed a four-year global Collaborative Framework Agreement, from 2013 to 2017, with Wetlands International (WI) to improve public and corporate policies and practices, which covers work at the Majnoon Oil Fields. This involves the development of a biodiversity and sustainable livelihoods action plan to reduce the impact of operations on the Ramsar Site, safeguard fresh water resources and enable restoration efforts. There is also an agreement between Shell and IUCN for cooperation on conservation of the Hawizeh Marsh. The three organizations have planned regular bi-monthly meetings but so far, these meetings have mainly been between Shell and WI because of staff changes in the IUCN regional office for West Asia in Jordan.

Despite Shell being one of the oil operators in the Mesopotamian Marsh area that is more open and keen to minimize their impacts on the Hawizeh Marsh, it was surprising that there had been no prior communication between them and CRIMW. In fact, the meeting at the Majnoon offices was the first time that the two parties had met. The Ramsar team strongly recommends that regular meetings between Shell and CRIMW continue, maybe with either the South Oil Company or the Ministry of Oil acting as intermediary. This would enable important exchanges of information and stakeholder views and help to ensure that best practices are being followed by Shell's operation within the Ramsar Site, and it could become a model of cooperation for the rest of the Mesopotamian Marsh area.

Due to the shortness of the meeting with Shell, the Ramsar team had outstanding questions they would have liked to discuss with Shell, including:

- Sources of water for operation and where the used water is discharged?
- How to deal with 'blow-outs'
- Toxic waste disposal
- International standards for drilling
- Monitoring
- EIA process, review and approval

4. Recommendations

The Ramsar team noted that the issues affecting the future of the Hawizeh Marsh are relevant from local to international levels. The table below is a list of the issues the team noted.

Table 1: Preliminary assessment of issues affecting the ecological character of the Hawizeh Marsh Ramsar Site

Issue/ task	Local	Regional	National	International
Deal with water issues across borders		X		X
Manage issues with I.R. Iran on the border dyke now in place		X	X	X
Create science-based wetland classification and maps relevant to this site	X		X	X
Create a national wetland policy/strategy relevant to this site and all future wetland protected areas in Iraq	X		X	
Improve cooperation between federal ministries with responsibilities for this area especially relating to wetlands	X		X	
Find ways to remove Hawizeh Marsh Ramsar Site from the Montreux List	X	X	X	X
Clarify which communities are Stakeholders that need to be involved in decision-making	X	X	X	
Ensure sustainable use of the lands and waters within and surrounding the Marsh	X	X	X	X
Ensure conservation of the ecological character of the Hawizeh Marsh Ramsar Site	X	X	X	X
Implement existing management plans for this area	X	X	X	
Improve cooperation among Governorate departments in Basra, Missan and Thi Qar with responsibilities for this area relating to wetlands	X		X	
Development of the Majnoon oil and gas field	X		X	
Improve local security	X	X	X	X
Clarify land ownership	X	X	X	
Create local jobs	X	X	X	

It would have been overly ambitious for the Ramsar team to try to address all of these issues during this visit and so the team has focused on those issues at the site level which can potentially be

addressed in the short term but which can lead to long-term benefits. The issues are outlined in Table 2 below, and recommendations from the Team are provided on how they can be addressed.

Table 2: Preliminary Advisory Team Recommendations

Issue	Recommendations
1. Regional level issues – Haur Al-Azim	
<p>Many times during the visit, people talked about the issues of the Iranian built dyke which has reduced the flow of water from the Haur Al-Azim side of the marsh into the Hawizeh. Despite attempts at negotiation between Iraq and Iran over this sensitive issue, there are no signs that this issue will be resolved in the near future.</p>	<p>Small steps should be taken to build trust and cooperation between the relevant agencies in Iraq and the I.R. Iran, in order to promote the conservation of both the Haur Al Hawizeh (Iraq) and the Haur Al-Azim (Iran). This can be done initially through technical cooperation and discussion, possible through joint projects organized by a third party, such as a UN agency, e.g. UNDP.</p>
2. National level issues	
<p>There is some dispute as to which ministry is responsible for wetland conservation and implementation of the Convention on Wetlands in Iraq. While CRIMW (MOWR) is the Ramsar Administrative Authority, the MOE is responsible for the management and monitoring of protected areas, such as Ramsar Sites and national parks. Such situations also occur in other countries where several ministries may have responsibilities for different aspects of wetland management. Thus, clarification of the role of each Ministry is needed (e.g. site management versus national policy direction), by the higher levels of the Iraqi Government.</p>	<p>The Ramsar team was told that the Prime Minister’s office will make a decision on this issue during a meeting. However, the date of the meeting has not been determined until now. The decision will be eagerly awaited.</p>
<p>The two evening meetings with representatives of some Basra, Missan and Thi Qar Governorate departments were very helpful but revealed that the participants held long-term misunderstandings and they were insufficiently briefed on the purpose of a RAM. More meetings at this level, especially if held on a regular basis, would be valuable in promoting better communication and cooperation.</p>	<p>A mechanism needs to be established to allow regular meetings to be held between federal agencies and governorate departments with responsibilities for wetland management, in order to promote coordination and information sharing.</p>
<p>It was welcome news that the national data set on wetland sites is being updated. However, it appears that it is not yet supported by standardized scientific terminology such as nationally-adopted wetland type names (at least in Arabic and Kurdish, possibly English) or a national wetland classification system.</p>	<p>A standardized system of wetland terminology should be established as the basis for a national wetland classification system based on good science. Such information can be reinforced by drafting a National Wetland Policy laying out the commitments of Iraqi government agencies for wetland sustainable use. Hawizeh can be used as the site to initiate the use of the terminology.</p>
3. Site level issues – local communities	

<p>Local village leaders and elders expressed concerns that their villages do not seem to be adequately engaged in the oil field development process; are not receiving a significant share of local job opportunities; and their views on issues facing Hawizeh Marsh are not being well considered.</p>	<p>Creation of a Hawizeh Marsh Stakeholders Group involving local stakeholders that meets at regular intervals will be a positive step in ensuring increased local participation and support.</p>
<p>Although the <i>Management Plan for the Hawizeh Marsh Ramsar Site of Iraq</i> (Iraq National Marshes and Wetlands Committee 2008, updated 2010 and 2012) has been prepared as well as the <i>Proposal of An Operational Program to Facilitate the Start-up of the Hawizeh Marsh Ramsar Site</i> (Nature Iraq 2010), implementation of the management plan has still not begun.</p>	<p>Implementation of recommendations wherever possible as laid out in the <i>Management Plan for the Hawizeh Marsh Ramsar Site of Iraq</i>.</p>
<p>The Ramsar team was unclear of the regulatory environment for certifying that areas constitute “protected” areas in Iraq or their relationship to the international standards established by IUCN’s Commission on Protected Areas. It seems clear that residents of such areas in Iraq will inherently require assurance of ongoing local natural resources use such as reed harvesting, water buffalo management, hunting and fishing. A category such as “Managed Natural Area” in the IUCN system is fully compatible with such a status.</p>	<p>CRIMW to provide to the forthcoming RAM team a tutorial on regulatory steps with regard to various types of granting permits for projects that may have environmental impacts. This would include the decision making process, division of responsibilities and the issuing of permits.</p>
<p>4. Site level issues – oil production sector</p>	
<p>Previously, there had been few meetings between CRIMW and the different oil companies operating in the Mesopotamian Marshes, and especially in the Hawizeh Marsh, so CRIMW had little information about the work of the companies in the marshlands. It was not until during this visit in February 2014 that the representatives of Shell and CRIMW were able to meet for the first time to introduce their respective work and to discuss the conservation of the Hawizeh Marsh.</p>	<p>A mechanism needs to be developed to enable greater communication between CRIMW/MOWR and Shell/South Oil Company, to ensure that oil production in the northern part of the Majnoon Oil Field is conducted in a sustainable manner with minimal impact to the Hawizeh Marsh Ramsar Site.</p> <p>It is important for CRIMW and MOWR to be engaged in the operations of the oil industry in and around the Central, Hammar and Hawizeh Marshes to ensure that international standards for best practice in oil production are followed.</p> <p>In the meantime, the many planning documents that have been prepared for the Hawizeh Marsh (Annex 3), should be shared with Shell. This would be a good entry point for MOWR to become a direct partner in the many files it leads and allow it to fulfill its regulatory, coordination and interagency awareness responsibilities.</p>
<p>It was difficult to understand the key steps in the process for granting environmental permits to allow oil exploration and production, as these seem to spread among a cross-section of federal, governorate and municipal agencies, ministries and departments.</p>	<p>It would be useful if the South Oil Company/Ministry of Oil can give to the future RAM team a simplified tutorial on regulatory, permitting and management responsibilities for oil development in Iraq.</p>

During the meeting with Shell at their offices with the Majnoon oil field, there was not enough time to learn about the process for approving oil development within the Hawizeh Marsh, the possible impacts and how any impacts would be mitigated.	Shell and the South Oil Company need to clarify the approval process for oil development within the Hawizeh Marsh, as well as the possible impacts of oil production and how any impacts would be mitigated.
5. Future Ramsar Advisory Mission	
This visit by the Ramsar team was meant as a precursor to a full Ramsar Advisory Mission (RAM) that would take place later in 2014.	The organization of a future RAM should be delayed to allow time for agreement on a more focused set of objectives. Consideration should be given to producing different versions of the report from the future RAM, each of which is written so that it is targeted at a particular stakeholder group, such as the oil sector.

5. Acknowledgements

Firstly, Clayton Rubec and Lew Young would like to thank CRIMW and the Ministry of Water Resources for their kind invitation, financial support and efficient organization in making the visit such a success. In particular, we would like to acknowledge the support of Mr. Hani Fakhri Gibachi and Ms. Sameerah Al Shabeeb, who also accompanied us throughout the visit.

Many other people from a wide range of backgrounds, including government officials, NGO staff, representatives of private companies, and academics, also accompanied the team and they were generous in sharing their knowledge and experience, and patient in answering our repeated questions. These people are acknowledged in Annex 2 and please forgive us if we have unknowingly out left your name.

We would also like to thank the people who call the marshes their home, for their hospitality in inviting us to their villages and for making us feel welcome.

Any errors or inaccuracies in this report lie solely with the authors who are still learning about the beautiful and complex wetland ecosystem that we call the Mesopotamian Marshes. We look forward to your corrections and improvements to this report so that we can work together to conserve this 'cradle of civilization'.



Some of the many people who provided support and advice to the visit team (L. Young)

Annex 1: Visit programme

Date	Time	Activities	The Executive Party	Governorate
Wednesday 12 Feb	12:00 - 16:00	Arrival of the representatives of the Center of the Restoration of Iraqi Marshes & Wetlands (CRIMW) and the Ministry of Water Resources (MOWR) in Al-Basra	–	Basra
Thursday 13 Feb	13:00	Receive experts at Al-Basra International Airport and transfer to Al-Basra Sheraton Hotel	Representatives of relations & media/ center of MOWR	Basra
		Reception for the experts at Al-Basra Sheraton Hotel	CRIMW	Basra
		Distribution of field visit programme to the experts	CRIMW	Basra
	16:00 - 18:00	Rest and lunch	Hotel restaurant	Basra
	20:30 - 22:00	Invitation for dinner with discussion of visit programme items	Hotel restaurant	Basra
Friday 14 Feb	06:00 - 07:00	Breakfast	Hotel	Basra
	07:00 - 07:30	Preparing for field visit to northern part of Al- Hawizeh Marsh	CRIMW and Relations & Media Department in MWR	Missan
	10:30 - 11:30	Visit to northern part of Al-Hawizeh Marsh	Iraqi team with experts	Missan
	11:30 - 15:00	Tour inside Al-Hawizeh Marsh	Iraqi team with experts	Missan
		Lunch inside the Marsh hosted by one of the tribal leaders	CRIMW	Missan
	15:00 - 16:00	Return to Missan Governorate Center	CRIMW	Missan
	16:00 - 18:30	Arrival to Al-Basra City	CRIMW	Basra
	18:30 - 20:00	Rest	Hotel	Basra
	20:00 - 21:30	Dinner	Hotel Restaurant	Basra
	21:30 - 22:30	Meeting for discuss and exchange ideas and opinions	Hotel	Basra
Saturday 15 Feb	07:30 – 08:30	Breakfast in the hotel	Hotel	Basra
	09:00 – 10:30	Arrival at southern part of Al-Hawizeh Marsh	CRIMW	Basra
	10:30 – 14:00	Tour inside southern part of Al-Hawizeh Marsh	Iraqi team with experts	Basra
	14:00 – 15:30	Visit to the Shell office at Majnoon Oil Field	Iraqi team with experts	Basra
	15:30 – 16:00	Return to Basra City	CRIMW	Basra
	16:00 – 19:00	Rest	International Basra Hotel	Basra
	19:00 – 21:00	Dinner invitation for the experts in one of Basra Cornish restaurants	CRIMW	Basra
	21:00 – 21:30	Return to hotel	CRIMW	Basra
Sunday 16 Feb	6:00 - 7:00	Breakfast	Hotel	Basra
	7:30 - 10:30	Releasing of field tour to Ur City	CRIMW	Thi-Qar
	10:30 - 11:30	Arrival to Ur City	Iraqi team with experts	Thi-Qar

	11:30 - 13:00	Travel to Al-Chibayish district and Central Marshes National Park	Iraqi team with experts	Thi-Qar
	13:00 - 14:30	Lunch in the national park <i>mudeef</i>	CRIMW	Thi-Qar
	14:30 - 16:30	Tour in Al-Chibayish Marshes and National Park	Iraqi team with experts	Thi-Qar
	16:30 - 18:30	Return to Basra City	CRIMW	Basra
	18:30 - 19:30	Rest	Hotel	Basra
	19:30 - 20:30	Dinner	Manawi Basha Restaurant	Basra
	21:00 - 23:00	Meeting with representatives of Al-Iraq Ministries and Governorate departments to discuss results of the visit and preparing of the final report and recommendations	Manawi Basha Hotel	Basra
	23:00 - 23:30	Return to the Hotel	CRIMW	Basra
Monday 17 Feb	06:00	Ramsar team depart for airport and return home	MWR/CRIMW	Basra

Annex 2: People interviewed during the visit

Many people accompanied the Ramsar team during the visit, many of whom the team were able to interview. The table below shows just those who we were able to collect name cards from or knew their contact details.

Name	Contact details
Iraq government	
Hani Fakhri Gibachi	CRIMW, e-mail : haninaji_eng@yahoo.com
Sameerah Al Shabeeb	CRIMW, e-mail : samira_abed2004@yahoo.com
Sadiq A. M. Al-Maliki	Council of Advisors of the Office of the Prime Minister, e-mail : sadiq_almalki78@yahoo.com
Dr. Hussein Ilaibi Zamil	Head of Environmental Policies Centre, Ministry of Water Resources e-mail : dr.hussein1974@yahoo.com
Dr. Furat A. Haider	Advisor of soil water, Ministry of Water Resources furathaider@yahoo.com
Mr. Abed Al Jaleel Mohamad Al Rubahee	Ministry of Oil Mob: 00964 770 346 3303
Dr. Maitham Abed Ala Sultan	Ministry of Science and Technology. Mob: 00964 790 144 4090
Mahmood Abas Ali	South Oil Company/ Majnoon Field Development e-mail : Mahmood.aljbori@yahoo.com Mob: 00964 780 917 7549
Haider I. Hassan	Director, Division of Natural Ecosystems, Environment Directorate of Basra, Ministry of Environment. e-mail : haideribrahem@gmail.com
Qusay K. Othman	Ministry of Agriculture, Agriculture Directorate of Basra, Assistant of Marshes Development Department e-mail: gusay.othman@gmail.com , Mob: 00964 780 789 7077
Dr. Aded Al Jabar J. Hassan	Basrah University / Center for Marin Science e-mail : a_jalop@yahoo.com Mob: 00964 780 110 7761
Mr. Haider Sadam Abed Al Kareem	South Oil Company Mob: 00964 780 917 7530
Nature Iraq	
Azzam Alwash	e-mail : azzam@natureiraq.org
Jassim Al-Asadi	e-mail : jassim.alasadi@natureiraq.org and Alasadi_jm2005@yahoo.com
Shell Iraq Petroleum Development BV	
Tom Hooft van Huysduynen	Project Director Majnoon Field Development, Shell Iraq Petroleum Development BV, Dubai Convention Tower, 11th Floor, PO Box 11677, Dubai, U.A.E. mob : +971 56 6837456 (UAE) ; mob : +964 78 09147676 (Iraq) e-mail : t.hooftvanhuysduynen@shell.com
Andrew Dempster	e-mail : Andrew.Dempster@shell.com
Richard Llewellyn	Seismic Project Manager

Annex 3: Bibliography

Some of these documents could be useful references for a Ramsar Advisory Mission.

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