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# Iraq's Marshlands: Resurrecting Eden

## Scott Pelley Reports on the Restoration of Iraq's Marshlands



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In Iraq, where many biblical scholars place the Garden of Eden, Scott Pelley finds a water world where the Marsh Arabs are making a comeback after Saddam nearly destroyed the cradle of civilization.



(CBS/Jenny Dubin)

(CBS) It turns out Saddam Hussein did possess a weapon of mass destruction and he used it in a slaughter that few have heard of until now: after the Gulf War in 1991, the dictator spent untold millions on this weapon, designed to exterminate an ancient civilization called the "Ma'dan," also known as the "Marsh Arabs."

They lived in Iraq between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers, where many biblical scholars place the Garden of Eden. But if this was the place where man fell from grace, Saddam Hussein showed just how far man can fall.

In a spectacular feat of engineering, he used water in a strike against his own people that not even an atom bomb could match. Recently, **60 Minutes** correspondent **Scott Pelley** journeyed there with an American engineer who is resurrecting this magical land that was turned to dust by Hussein's secret weapon.

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"We're now officially inside the marsh. And you can see the reeds getting denser and denser, taller and taller," Azzam Alwash told Pelley, as they were heading by boat deeper into the marshland.

Alwash grew up in the water world that the Greeks named Mesopotamia, the "land between two rivers."

"I gotta tell you, this is not like any part of Iraq I've ever seen before," Pelley noted, as they boated past thick, lush and green reeds rising out of the water.

"Right? I mean, when you say Iraq, it's a desert, right? It's burning oil," Alwash said. "It's magical, is

what it is. This is magic."

It has been more than 30 years since Alwash pushed through the reeds with his father, who ran the irrigation office there. In 1978, he left to study in America and became a partner in an engineering firm.

"I achieved the American dream, Scott," Alwash proudly told Pelley.

"You'd been living in the United States for 25 years. You're an American citizen. You married an American woman. Your children are as American as they can be," Pelley noted.

"And I'm as American as can be," Alwash pointed out.

"Why did you imagine going back to Iraq after the life you had built?" Pelley asked.

"I realized at some point in time that money and success and the American dream is not everything. Working on passion, on something that drives you is everything," Alwash said.

His passion is a world where Mother Nature meets Father Time: it's the cradle of civilization outlined by the Tigris and Euphrates, the likely birthplace of agriculture, the written word and the wheel.

But once the ancients set civilization on its course, the Ma'dan stayed behind.

Their villages are primitive. They weave a life out of the reeds of the marsh. They bind them into homes, feed them to their water buffalo and burn them to bake their bread.

There's not much in the way of electricity, education or health care.

But elders, like Sahi Salay, told Pelley they did just fine until 1991, when they suffered their own kind of Holocaust. That was when the U.S. and its allies invaded southern Iraq to throw Saddam Hussein out of Kuwait.

The elder President Bush urged Iraqis to overthrow their dictator.

The Ma'dan and other Shiites in the south supported an uprising to topple Hussein's regime. The marshes, known for ages as a smuggler's paradise, turned out to be a perfect place for the rebels to hide, with their endless maze of waterways.

But in 1991, when the allies withdrew, the dictator turned Eden into hell.

"The United Nations Environmental Program called it the biggest engineered environmental disaster of the last century," Alwash explained.

Hussein tried to wipe out the Marsh Arabs by destroying their world. He built six canals to divert the waters of the Tigris and Euphrates out into the desert and the Persian Gulf.

In a five-year project 90 percent of the marshes were drained - an area of more than 3,000 square miles.

"As an engineer, I'm telling you, drying of the marshes is definitely not an easy task. It's a monumental engineering project," Alwash explained. "He put every piece of equipment available in Iraq under his control at the services of the projects needed to dry the marshes."

"Saddam was using water as a weapon?" Pelley asked.

"You know, the world was looking for weapons of mass destruction. And the evidence was right under its nose," Alwash.

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