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WHAT HAPPENED TO THE IRAQI MARSH ARABS AND THEIR LAND?

THE MYTH ABOUT GARDEN OF EDEN AND THE NOBLE SAVAGE

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Abstract

In the aftermath of the 2003 war against Iraq, the newspapers are full of stories about the monstrosities of Saddam Hussein's regime. One example is the destruction of the Iraqi marshlands leading to severe consequences for the human and wildlife population. While the responsibility for the atrocity against the Marsh Arabs is Saddam Hussein's, the desiccation of the marsh environment can be ascribed to a number of the hydro-political decisions made in the catchment area of the Euphrates and Tigris Rivers. Based on an analysis of the discourses of the destruction, it is demonstrated how these have changed after the war and are used in the battle to legitimise the war. This has led to a simplified image of the marshes and the Marsh Arab way of life. As the paper shows, a more complex approach towards the processes leading to this human and environmental disaster is required, if repatriation and rehabilitation of the area are to stand a chance.

Siden krigen mod Irak blev indledt i marts 2003, har aviserne være fulde af historier om Saddam Husseins uhyrligheder. Et eksempel herpå er ødelæggelsen af Iraks marskområder, der har haft katastrofale konsekvenser for såvel menneskeliv som områdets rige dyreliv. Mens ansvaret for overgreb på befolkningen er Saddam Husseins, skyldes udtørringen af marsksystemet en række hydro-politiske beslutninger, som er blevet taget i hele Eufrat og Tigris' opland. Artiklen viser, hvordan diskurserne om ødelæggelsen af marsken har ændret sig efter krigen, og at de er blevet brugt til at legitimere krigen. Dette har givet et forsimplet billede af såvel marskområderne som marskarabernes levevis. Det konkluderes, at det er nødvendigt med en mere nuanceret forståelse af de problemer, der førte til denne humane og økologiske katastrofe, hvis naturgenopretningen og repatrieringen af marskaraberne skal have en chance.

Introduction

While the war against Saddam Hussein and his regime was relatively easily won, the peace was nowhere won in the autumn of 2004. The military actions against Iraq made the 'coalition of the willing' an occupation power, a power that should bring stability, peace, and prosperity to the people of Iraq. This appeared more difficult than defeating the Baath regime. Meanwhile, another battle took place in the public sphere, particularly in the coalition countries. This was the battle over the legitimacy of the war. The war and the ending of it had not let to the discovery of the renounced weapons of mass destruction, which was one of the main arguments for military action. The removal of Saddam Hussein did, however, fill the media with new stories of his atrocities. Some of these were well-known to human rights groups, Iraqi expatriates, and others who repeatedly have had voiced concern about the dictator's actions. An example is the destruction of the Iraqi marshes and the plight of the Marsh Arabs.

This paper is based on Burgess' idea that mass media are an integral part of the cultural processes that produce environmental meanings (Burgess, 1990). By analysing the discourses that are communicated through e.g. newspapers we can follow the different ways environmental meaning has been produced vis-à-vis the Marsh Arabs and their environment. For instance, shortly after the war had begun, on April 4, 2003, the newspaper Denver Post brought the following article (Tweit, 2003):

> Restoring the Garden of Eden
>
> As an antidote to images of the chaotic aftermath of war in Iraq, I conjure a vision of hope: a shimmering expanse of water and life that may again grace the Iraqi desert. Until a decade ago, southern Iraq boasted one of the world's largest wetlands, the Mesopotamia Marshes, almost 7,800 square miles of vibrant pond, canal and reed thicket, a watery oasis the size of Massachusetts. Biblical scholars claim that the vast area of wetland, fed by the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, was the real-life Garden of Eden. […] The story of these once-lush wetlands is written in the past tense: After the 1991 Gulf War, when thousands of Shi'ite rebels took refuge in the reed thickets, Saddam Hussein drained the marshes and exposed their hiding place.

The article continues, but does not mention how up-stream dams in Turkey and Syria have affected the marsh ecosystem and how they will influence on rehabilitation of the marshes – just to mention one of the shortcomings. The purpose of the present paper is to analyse the media

coverage of the Iraqi marshes and the Marsh Arabs – primarily in newspaper and magazine articles in the coalition countries. This is done in order show to how the stories of the destruction of the marshes and the plight of the Marsh Arabs affect both our understanding of the future of this area and the legitimacy of the war.

The paper is divided into four sections. First, an introduction to the Marsh Arabs and the Iraqi marshes is provided. In the second section, different stories of destruction are discussed. It is demonstrated that Saddam Hussein's plans for the marshes were based on British plans from the 1950s, even if the British did not want to destroy the marshes. Nevertheless, Saddam Hussein adopted both the British plans and their environmental discourse. Hence, Saddam Hussein had the idea to drain the marshes before the 1991, 1st Gulf war and it was not – at the beginning – a retaliation for the Shia uprising. This contradicts the story usually found in the newspaper articles. Following this account, the section outlines two different discourses of the destruction of the marshes as they can be found in newspaper articles. The history, content, and implications of these two discourses are discussed and it is shown how discourses changed shortly before the 2003, 2nd Gulf war. In the third section, implications of the 'discourses of destruction' are discussed in relation to the rehabilitation projects and the return of the Marsh Arabs. The discourses convey a static and locally-based understanding of the problem complex, an understanding that may influence on future plans for the area and the people. Finally, some concluding remarks are made.

The Marsh Arabs and their lands

The Marsh Arabs, also called the Ma'dan, are claimed to be descendants of the Sumerians, and their way of life is considered to be one of the oldest living cultures – celebrated by Thesiger and other travellers almost half a century ago (Maxwell, 1957; Thesiger, 1964; Young, 1977). Historically, the Ma'dan lived in the marshlands around the confluence of the Euphrates and Tigris Rivers in southern Iraq, an area of 15-20,000 square kilometres. Their livelihood was tuned to the flood environment and consisted of a combination of fishing and rice cultivation mixed with livestock breeding of buffalos. Swamp reed was used to build houses and for centuries this self-sufficient way of life saw few chances.

THE PEOPLE

The Ma'dan lived in relative isolation until the First World War. By then, increasing trade and labour migration brought greater contact with the remaining society (UNEP, 2001). The surrounding community did not consider the Ma'dan fellow Arabs and looked upon them with a combination of scorn and fear (Levy, 1924). Between the 1960s and the 1980s, economic migration reduced the marsh population with more than 100,000 and the area felt the changes from the surrounding society (Fawcett and Tanner, 2002). In the 1970s, when Iraq had an economic boom after the increase in oil prices, education and health services began to reach the Marsh Arabs although at a slower pace than in the rest of the country. At the same time, the subsistence economy decreased in favour of seasonal work or temporary employment in the cities (Tkachenko, 2003). These actions towards 'modernity' did not prevent people to be impoverished and marginalised compared to the surrounding Iraqi society (Young, 1977). During the 1980-88, Iran-Iraq war, the marshes were turned into a battle zone. Iranian troops used the marshes to penetrate into Iraq. The Marsh Arabs are Shia-Muslims and the regime believed them to be sympathetic towards the Iranian intruders. Also, the marshes were a popular hide-out for deserters and therefore often subject to Iraqi bombings (Sluglett, 2003). After the 1991, 1st Gulf war, the Shia-Muslims of the south rebelled against Saddam Hussein after active outside encouragement (FORWARD, 2003). The well-known story is that the rebellion failed and the Shia-Muslims including the Ma'dan became subject to the regime's retaliations. After the rebellion, many Shia-Muslims went hiding in the inaccessible marsh area. This led the Iraqi regime to bomb and assault the area until the UN imposed a 'no-fly zone' south of the 32° parallel in August 1992. This was in response to the UN's Special Rapporteur to Iraq, Max von der Stoel's briefing of the Security Council on this situation in southern Iraq in general and of the Marsh Arabs in particular. The 'no-fly zone' only stopped the air attacks; the regime's assaults on the Marsh Arabs continued (Mitchell, 2003).

According to a Human Rights Watch report from January 2003, the Marsh Arabs have suffered some of the worst repression by the Baath regime (HRW, 2003). They have been subjected to destruction of their villages and their land, their water has been poisoned, and people have been killed. Many have fled. It is difficult to find reliable information about the number of Marsh Arabs. According to UNHCR (1995), around half a million people lived in the area at the end of the 1980-88, Iran-Iraq war. Human Rights Watch, on the other hand, estimates that 250,000 Marsh Arabs lived there in 1991 (HRW, 2003). These differences may be ascribed to the fact that many were hiding in the area and therefore the number of people in the area was higher than the number of ethnic Marsh Arabs. In the 1990s, however, the number declined dramatically, as the Ma'dan way of life was destroyed by the Iraqi regime. Consequently, they had few options for

survival – they could stay and try to making a living although an estimated 90% of the marshes had disappeared; they could accept resettlement somewhere else in Iraq; or they could escape. Again the numbers are not in agreement. While Human Rights Watch (2003) has suggested that app. 40,000 remained in the area, a UN report from June 2003 stated that 'Today few Marsh Arabs (perhaps only 10,000) are living in their traditional marshlands' (UNOHCI, 2003: 5). This report further estimates that 100-200,000 Marsh Arabs are internally displaced persons, while up to 100,000 have left the country as refugees, with 40-50,000 of them living in Iran, which has the biggest Marsh-Arab refugee community. A survey conducted by AMAR after the 2003 war shows that 73,000 marsh dwellers were forcibly relocated by the Baath regime and restrained in different locations within the marsh area (AMAR, 2003).

THE LAND

The marshlands are located at the confluence of Euphrates and Tigris, just before they flow into the Persian Gulf. Both rivers take their rise in the Anatolian mountains in Turkey and snow-fall here is the major precipitation source. Hence, the rivers gather their water resources in climates rich in precipitation and traverse hundreds of kilometres in arid lands where they are the main source of livelihood (Kliot, 1996). Consequently, changes in the water flow up-stream can have profound effects on the marshes. Being one of the most important river systems in a region dominated by drylands, conflicts over Euphrates and Tigris have been common for centuries as discussed in a number of papers (e.g. Beaumont, 1996; Biger, 1989; Naff and Hanna, 2003; Schulz, 1995). Iraq, Syria, and Turkey share the waters of the Tigris[1] and Euphrates and especially two downstream countries Iraq and Syria are highly dependent on the water due to their arid climates and policies of food self-sufficiency (Carkoglu and Eder, 2001). Hydro-engineering schemes therefore have geo-political consequences.

Since the 1950s, regulation of the river has altered the ecology of the river basin. The spring floods, which sustained the marsh ecosystem, disappeared with the building of dams (UNEP, 2001). Already in the early 1980s, travellers noticed that the marsh area was shrinking due to up-stream dams and irrigation projects as well as draining for agricultural purposes at the fringes of the marshes (Spencer, 1982). Until the mid-1980s, Turkey prioritised hydroelectric development, which did not cause concern for the other riparian states as the dams only regulated the river flow but not the water amount. In the mid-1980s, Turkey changed approach from a largely

[1] Tigris also flows through Iran, but the Iranian 'part' of the river is relatively short. The Iranian use of the water from the Tigris is limited although dams have been built (Kliot, 1996).

hydroelectric programme to an integrated regional development programme including irrigated agriculture. The country's biggest dam project, GAP[2], was extended and today it combines 22 dams in a giant irrigation and energy project (Carkoglu and Eder, 2001). This change caused concern in downstream countries. In the 1980s, the effects of these upstream projects began to show in the marshes. The water flow diminished, while the remaining water in the rivers was saline[3] or polluted from the pesticides used for upstream agriculture.[4] In turn drinking water became polluted and desiccation of the marshes increased. The Marsh Arabs experienced a deterioration of their environment. While this – to some extent – was an unwanted although predictable effect of a project such as GAP, the later destruction of the marshes was intended.[5]

Under the pretext of reclaiming wetlands for agricultural purposes and furthering development, the Iraqi government let the marshes drain in the 1970s. Based on British ideas from the 1950s, a 565 km long canal between Euphrates and Tigris, the so-called Saddam or Third River, was constructed in order to desalinate the Euphrates water (Schulz, 1995). However, Saddam Hussein's project did not create arable land, the draining went further. During the 1990s, still bigger parts of the marshes were drained, which means that prior to the war in March 2003 an estimated 93% had been destroyed. The only partly intact marsh straddled the Iran-Iraq border and was fed by river flows beyond Iraqi control. However, this area is also highly vulnerable due to dams in Iran and Turkey. The majority of the former marsh area had dried out and turned into thick salt crusts. The effects for the human and animal life were devastating (UNEP, 2001). Within a decade, the former marshes had almost disappeared in return for barren land and the livelihood of the Ma'dan was gone.

The question is if the marshes can be rehabilitated? Environmental experts note that rehabilitation of the marshes is a geo-political issue and involves the whole river basin of the Euphrates and Tigris (e.g. Naff and Hanna, 2003; Havnø, 2003; UNEP, 2001). Given the limited hydrometric data available during the Baarth regime, it has been difficult to assess the relative balance of on-site and off-site water supply and river diversion schemes (Brasington, 2003). As

[2] GAP is the Turkish acronym for The Southeast Anatolia Development Project.

[3] Irrigation agriculture in drylands carries a constant risk of soil salinisation. Often insufficient water will be available thus causing salinisation.

[4] Please refer to Schulz (1995) and Beaumont (1996, 1998) for an account of the effects of this in other regions of Iraq as well as in Syria.

[5] It has been estimated that a fully functioning GAP will reduce the flow from Tigris by one-third and the inflow from Euphrates will be halved (Kliot, 1996).

the Iraqi marshes are located at the end of this river basin, upstream changes in water quality and quantity affect the marshes. Carkoglu and Eder have explained the situation this way (2001: 64):

> Apart from the implicit ethno-politics behind the Iraqi position on the water issue, the water scarcity has become increasingly acute particularly since Iraq is the southernmost riparian state in the Euphrates basin. This is also where the degradation of water quality due to upstream development most adversely affects Iraq. Owing to the highly polluted water it has been reported that some villages now have to import water by truck and suffer from water-borne diseases.

Hence, the marshes have to be understood in a regional context. Up-stream dams hamper the yearly flooding into the marshes following the snow melt in Anatolia. Hence, even without changes in the annual water flow, the dams have a significant influence on the marsh ecosystem. After Saddam Hussein's draining of the marshes, another 10 years of GAP development has taken place. This means that the consequences of GAP for the marshes are unknown and hence rehabilitation efforts are faced with serious lack of information.

THE ATTENTION

Although environmental experts, human right activists, and the like have raised concern for the desiccation of the marshes and the destruction of the Ma'dan livelihood through the 1990s (e.g. Maltby, 1994; North, 1993; Middle East Watch, 1992), the Marsh Arabs received little public attention until May 2001 when United Nations Environmental Programme (UNEP) published a report titled 'Mesopotamian marshlands: the demise of an ecosystem'. This report gave rise to temporary public attention, but no real reaction. Apart from the UN's Special Rapporteur to Iraq, Max von der Stoel, notably the organisation Assistance for Marsh Arabs and Refugees (AMAR) has called for international action in regard to the Marsh Arabs. AMAR was established in 1991 and its founder, MEP Emma Nicholson, has raised the issue in the European Parliament on numerous occasions. In January 1995, the European Parliament passed a resolution characterising the Marsh Arabs as a persecuted minority whose very survival was threatened by the Iraqi government (Nicholson 2003: 318).

The total demise of the marsh environment, and thereby the Ma'dan way of life, has led UNHCR to categorise the refugees as environmental refugees (UNHCR, 1995). Moreover, at a meeting hosted by the U.S. Institute of Peace at November 11, 2002, it was suggested that Saddam Hussein could be found guilty of genocide against the Marsh Arabs. Among the participants was Professor Joseph Dellapenna, Villanova University Law School, he explained: 'The scale of the

destruction and of the effects of the destruction are such that the actions of the Iraqi government can fairly be described as a leading example of "ecocide" – the destruction of an entire ecosystem.' And he continued: 'What is unique about this instance of ecocide, and what sets it apart from other instances of ecocide, is that the destruction was for the purpose of destruction and not for some, arguably beneficial purpose such as economic development. Here ecocide was adopted as a deliberate mechanism for bringing about genocide' (Dellapenna, 2003).

From late 2002, the Marsh Arabs came into public attention and calls were made for action to be taken before it was too late. New narratives of the plight of the Marsh Arabs were constructed and used in the fight over the legitimacy of the war, as will be demonstrated in the following sections.

The discursive construction of a disaster

While few would disagree that the destruction of the livelihoods of the Marsh Arabs and the demise of the marsh environment is a tragedy, it is worth while looking into the discursive construction of this disaster because it has wide implications for the possible solutions as well as for the understanding of how it happened. First, the initial plans for the marshes are discussed in relation to the environmental discourse they represent. These plans were launched by the British in the 1950s and later modified by Saddam Hussein, but they relied on the same rhetoric. This history is forgotten in the later stories of destruction found in Western media at the turn of the millennium. In this context, I will emphasise two (environmental) discourses – in the first, the marshes are labelled 'Mesopotamia' thereby signalling the continuity with the past; in the second, the marshes are called 'The Garden of Eden'. While the latter also might be seen as a type of continuity, it is rather the construction of the undisturbed, of the pure and innocent which is the core of the argument. Although different, both discourses are part of the changing terms of environmental policies that have occurred over the last four or five decades.

PLANS FOR THE MARSHES AND THE MA'DAN

Plans for the marshes date back to the 1950s when the British engineer Frank Haigh made a report published by the Iraqi Irrigation Development Commission. Here Haigh proposed to make a series of canals, embankments, and sluices on Euphrates and Tigris in order to divert salty and polluted water away from the irrigated area between the two rivers. Thereby marshland could be reclaimed for agriculture. In Haigh's view, precious water was wasted by letting it seep away into the marshes instead of exploiting the water for irrigation (Pearce, 1993). A positive side

effect of this project was that it would be a means to obtain control over this 'wild' area. The marshes were perceived as an inaccessible area escaping government control thereby giving refuge to regime opponents. By draining the marshes, it would be difficult to hide there and the land itself could be reclaimed as arable land. Hence, these plans concerned drainage and construction of irrigation channels in order to increase the arable area – the plan was not to destroy livelihood opportunities (Mitchell, 2003). The marshes were viewed from a user-perspective with little concern for conservation of the wild-life habitat or the ancient culture. Viewing the marshes from a protection perspective is a later invention.

Usually, Saddam Hussein's plans for the marshes are thought to be an outcome of the 1991, 1st Gulf war. But in fact they date back to the 1980-88, Iran-Iraq war. This was evident when the Kurds obtained Iraqi official documents after the 'liberation' of Iraqi Kurdistan in 1991. Among the 40 cubic metres of documents, which the regime did not get time to destruct, there was correspondence concerning a so-called 'Plan of Action for the Marshes' from 1987 (Mitchell, 2003).[6] Physically, the plans had a striking resemblance to Haigh's plans, and the official Iraqi justification was that the project would 'wash away the salt-encrustation on millions of hectares of over-irrigated farm land, to reclaim new land for much needed food production and to increase the amount of water available for irrigation' (North, 1993: 11). Nevertheless, Saddam Hussein's plans for the marshes were related to marshes' use as a hiding ground for Iraqi outlaws, dissidents, and opponents of the regime, but the wish to make the marshes controllable also had an international political claim. The 'Plan of Action for the Marshes' was in fact linked to the wish to control Iranian intruders, who entered Iraq through the marshes (Mitchell, 2003). So far the plan was similar to the British idea of controlling the area and it was legitimised by reference to the increase of arable land – as suggested in the Haigh report (Pearce, 1993). However, as the following correspondence found in Iraqi Kurdistan shows, the Iraqi regime's plan went far beyond the British ideas. According to a document dated January 30, 1989, the steps included:[7]

> Technical security operations against terrorist elements in the Marshes, such as poisoning, explosions, and burning of houses against friends and relatives of subversives in the Marsh areas as a lesson to others.'[…] 'Assassination of "hostile elements"; controlling traffic; burning and demolishing houses.'[…] 'Continuing the

[6] The Iraq Research and Documentation Project (IRDP) has translated the documents into English and made them accessible via Harvard University's homepage: http://www.fas.harvard.edu/~irdp/

[7] Document Reference: E/CN.4/1993/45 (pp. 94-97).

> economic blockade more efficiently to limit provision of their daily living needs, by withdrawing all food supply agencies, banning the sale of fish… and prohibiting the traffic of goods.

However, before the plan was fully realised, the 1991, 1st Gulf war added a new dimension; the total destruction of the marshes should also be seen in the context of this war. Two-thirds of Iraq is desert land and highly dependent on Euphrates and Tigris for irrigation water. This dependency increased with the UN sanctions after the 1991, 1st Gulf war and the Iraqi attempts to become self-sufficient in terms of food. In 1992, the Saddam River – or Third River – was inaugurated. The British plans for the area from the 1950s had included this 565-km long canal linking Euphrates and Tigris (Mitchell, 2003). However, Saddam Hussein was the one to realise it, although the outcome of the canal was different from the British intensions.[8] At this point in time, the international attention towards the Marsh Arabs was meagre. In 1995, however, Schulz pointed to the deliberate destruction of the marshes. He noted (1995: 109-110):

> The regime of Saddam Hussein has, however, clearly shown that the intention behind the complex Tigris-Euphrates diversion scheme was not only to improve the agricultural sector. Large areas of agricultural land in the Amara region have been flooded deliberately. The flood weapon is thereby double-edged; Iraqi opposition groups portray it as a new tactic in the Baghdad regime's efforts to subdue the south. The huge diversion has not only caused eco-genocide, whereby 57% of the 15,000 kilometres of marshland has been turned into dry land, but also a genocide of the Marsh Arabs who have been living in these areas for nearly 5,000 years. The drying marshes make the Marsh Arabs an easy target for Saddam Hussein's forces.

Though the outcome was different, the British and the Baath regime build upon the same view of the environment – a view that is generally disregarded today, especially among environmentalists. Dryzek, who have discussed the changing environmental discourses, provides this illustration (1997: 3):

> Once areas of marshy land were called swamps. The only sensible thing to do with swamps was to drain them, so the land could be put to some useful purpose. Governments subsidized landowners to drain swamps. Today, we call the same areas

[8] For a detailed account of the development of the draining scheme from the British ideas onwards, please refer to Mitchell, 2003.

> wetlands, and the governments have enacted legislation to protect their recognized value in providing habitat for wildlife, stabilization of ecosystems, and absorption of pollutants.

The former approach provided by Dryzek can be seen in the attitude towards the Iraqi marshes employed by the British in the 1950s (see e.g. Davies, 1957) and later by the Iraqi regime: The marshes were perceived as swamps; it was a resource that could be utilised by draining. This is an environmental discourse in which natural resources are considered from a user perspective and not from a protection perspective. Likewise the people inhabiting these areas were regarded backward – after all, they were said to have had the same way of life for 5,000 years. This was part of a modernity discourse arguing that people should be 'developed'. Also, the draining of the marshes and subsequent change of lifestyle for the Marsh Arabs were part of the growth economy discourse that considered the Ma'dan primitive and living in an unexploited area. This was further emphasised by the fact that large oil reserves[9] are located in the area and these are difficult to access prior to draining.[10] This is an illustration of the discourses that Saddam Hussein applied, discourses that he had adapted from the British just like the first draining plans. Saddam Hussein used these discourses to legitimise the 'developments' in the marshes. As we have seen, however, the draining of the marshes did not make the land arable, but destroyed it, and similarly the living conditions of the Marsh Arabs were not improved, but ruined. The Iraqi government's motives for the campaign in the marshes have been summed up this way: It was to eliminate a people (i.e. the Ma'dan) outside the government's control; to create a great engineering scheme equivalent of the palaces built in the cities; to generate economic development and increase oil production; and not least to destruct a habitat that provided refuges for regime opponents. In short the motive was to keep the regime in power (Fawcett and Tanner, 2002). A means in this campaign was to disgrace the Marsh Arabs for instance in the Baath Party newspaper *Al-Thawra*,[11] which noted that the Marsh Arabs had become so accustomed to breeding buffaloes that they had become indistinguishable from them and that they had an intrinsic degraded nature (al-Khafaji, 1992).

[9] According to the U.S. Department of Energy, the two largest fields in the marsh area contain an estimated 10-30 billion barrels and 15 billion barrels respectively (Energy Information Administration, *Iraq*, March 2002, in Human Rights Watch, 2003). The estimated production is 3m barrels per day, equal to Iraq's current total production. It is believed that building the infrastructure of roads, pipelines, and power lines will undermine the ecology of the marshes (Schifferes, 2003).

[10] In fact, draining of the marshes for oil exploitation began in 1985 when the Iraqi government drained the eastern section of the Al Hammar marsh to exploit an oilfield there (North, 1993).

[11] *Al-Thawra*, 1-3 April 1991, quoted in al-Khafaji (1992).

Contemporary Western narratives build upon a different view of the marshes. The two discourses analysed below have a common ground in viewing the marshes as wetlands, i.e. as a resource that should be protected and not exploited.[12]

The Mesopotamia discourse

This discourse can be dated back to UNEP's report from May 2001 titled 'Mesopotamian marshlands: the demise of an ecosystem'.[13] This report gained public attention, and subsequently in newspaper and magazine articles the term 'Mesopotamian marshes' was reproduced. In these articles, however, Mesopotamia was often used as synonym to the marsh area although the term rightly refers to a much larger area as Mesopotamia is a Greek word meaning 'between the rivers'. Moreover, these articles established a link to the historical Mesopotamia by making references to the ancient history of Iraq as if this had taken place in the very marshes (e.g. The Independent[14], National Geographic[15], Gulf News[16], BBC[17]). Hence, the Mesopotamia discourse conveyed an image of the marshes as the very centre of the ancient Mesopotamia, but it had its source in an environmental organisation and the environment was indeed at the core of the argument. The Mesopotamia discourse can be seen as part of the environmentalism discourse of the 1990s (e.g. Milton, 1996, 1997; Scoones, 1999). What is worth noticing is that Saddam Hussein is not mentioned. In the 50 page long UNEP-report, the destruction of the marshes is described without any reference to the regime *per se*. Instead emphasis is on the sophisticated utilisation of the wetland resources that the Ma'dan had invented and refined over millennia. The report emphasises this so-called sustainable resource use and looks to the whole Euphrates-Tigris river basin for obtaining sustainability (UNEP, 2001). In this way, it builds upon what Dryzek (1997) has labelled 'the quest for sustainability', which has a global outlook in finding solutions to environmental problems.

[12] The discourses are analysed using Dryzek's approach towards environmental discourses (Dryzek, 1997).

[13] It should be noted that the term 'Mesopotamian Marshes' has been used before, for instance in a publication by Bird Life International (Stattersfield et al., 1998). However, here the term is used to cover a much larger area.

[14] See article by M. McCarthy (2001) in The Independent.

[15] See article at National Geographic News, homepage of National Geographic (2001).

[16] See article in the on-line version of the UAE newspaper Gulf News (2001).

[17] See article by A. Kirby (2001) at BBC's homepage.

The Mesopotamia discourse relies on the metaphor 'Mesopotamia'. While the utilisation of the marshes and the special way of life, which could be found there until recently, can be dated back to 3,000 BC, this way of life is not the common image of Mesopotamia. Usually, Mesopotamia is linked with the 'cradle of civilisation', with the invention of cultivation and the taming of animals. Hence, Mesopotamia includes taming of the wild or manipulation of 'nature', while the marshes are 'natural' areas, wild lands that humans have adapted to. In the Mesopotamia discourse, the metaphor has gained a new meaning. By using the term Mesopotamia, a link is made to the glorious past of this area, but not to the famous utilisation and 'taming' of natural resources. Instead the emphasis is on the continuous use of the wetlands, because this continued use is considered a symbol of sustainability. In this way, the Mesopotamia discourse links into the ideas of 'primitive ecological wisdom', which Milton has characterised as part of the environmentalism discourses of the 1990s (Milton, 1996: 229):

> The assumption is that the ability of human beings to live in harmony with nature with their environment is somehow 'natural' or innate, and that those who live closest to what is taken to be a 'natural' way of life possess more ecological wisdom than those who, through economic development, have become alienated from 'nature'.

Hence, within the Mesopotamia discourse, the Ma'dan are perceived to have ecological wisdom and to live in harmony with nature. This gives them a symbolic importance as a people who have maintained a sustainable way of life. The implication of the Mesopotamia discourse with its emphasis on continuity and sustainability is that the Ma'dan people should be protected – not persecuted – as they are 'paragons of ecological virtue'[18], which make them almost 'sacred'. Further, the destruction of the marshes is illegitimate because continuity creates legitimacy. Here, the metaphor Mesopotamia and references to the past make the destruction illegitimate without even mentioning Saddam Hussein.

At a different level, the discourse's focus on the Marsh Arabs' continued use of the natural resources implies that this sophisticated – sustainable – utilisation should be achieved again. In line with environmentalism discourses of the 1990s, the solution to the environmental problem is found by looking at the marshes in a regional perspective including the up-stream actions such as the construction of dams.

[18] The expression 'paragons of ecological virtue' is from Roy Ellen's paper on green primitivism (1986: 10).

THE EDEN DISCOURSE

In early 2003, a number of newspaper articles described the marshes as 'The Garden of Eden' (e.g. The Guardian[19], The Wall Street Journal[20], and Gainesville Sun[21]).[22] This discourse can be traced back to Iraq Foundation, a group of expatriate Iraqis, who funded the organisation in 1991 to work for democracy and human rights in Iraq. With the 'Eden Again' project, the organisation wants to draw attention to the destruction of the marshes and the persecution of the Ma'dan and to raise money for a 'restoration of the Mesopotamian marshlands' (Iraq Foundation, 2003). In that way, the Iraq Foundation integrates the Mesopotamia discourse in the Eden discourse. The project idea dates back to spring 2002, but real public attention was not gained until a year later – just before the outbreak of the 2003, 2nd Gulf war. At that time, however, the discourse became dominant and references to Eden or Paradise[23] became commonplace (e.g. The New York Times[24], The Guardian[25], The Washington Post[26], Berlingske Tidende[27]).

The discourse applies Eden as a metaphor. This may not be the most obvious metaphor for swaps and marshes with plenty of reeds but few apple trees. The 'Garden of Eden' terminology is usually connected to the exotic flora and fauna found in ancient near east gardens of the rich and powerful as in this example by Foster (1998: 321):

[19] See article by D. Campell (2003) in The Guardian.

[20] See article by B. Spindle (2003) in The Wall Street Journal.

[21] See article by G. Bruno (2003) in Gainesville Sun.

[22] It should be noted that the land between the rivers (i.e. Mesopotamia) has been associated with Eden due to the text in Genesis 2, 10-14: 'A river flowed out of Eden to water the garden, and there it divided and became four rivers. The name of the first is Pishon; it is the one which flows around the whole land of Havilah, where there is gold; and the gold of that land is good; bdellium and onyx stone are there. The name of the second river is Gihon; it is the one which flows around the whole land of Cush. And the name of the third river is Tigris, which flows east of Assyria. And the fourth river is the Euphrates'. The reference to Euphrates and Tigris has led some to believe that the area between these famous rivers – although not necessarily the marsh area – could be the Garden of Eden (e.g. Willcocks, 1912). However, most scholars agree that neither in Christianity nor in Islam, Eden is a geographical place on Earth – one exception can be found in Hamblin, 1987.

[23] It should be noted that while reference to the Garden of Eden can be made by referring to Genesis, a reference to Paradise shows lack of understanding the difference between the Garden of Eden (as the initial earthly place) and Paradise (as the ultimate divine place).

[24] See article by M. Santora (2003) in The New York Times.

[25] See article by E. MacAskill (2003) in The Guardian.

[26] See article by L. Jacobson (2003) in The Washington Post.

[27] See article by S. Voigt (2003) in the Danish newspaper Berlingske Tidende.

> The controlled coexistence of exotic and indigenous flora and fauna in palatial and urban settings provided a powerful, living metaphor for mental maps of a more perfect world – the original gardens of Eden.

Even though it has become widely accepted to associate Eden with southern Iraq, the myth about Eden has little resemblance with the marshes of southern Iraq. Nonetheless, Eden is used as a metaphor in this most recent and dominant discourse of the destruction of the marshes.

The content of the discourse is different from the Mesopotamia discourse in so far that environment is not at the core. The area is precious and has an Eden-like status, but environmental problems are not seen in a regional or geo-political perspective. It is Saddam Hussein who has the responsibility for the destruction. Two years passed from the Mesopotamia discourse until the Eden discourse developed. In the meantime, Iraq became part of President Bush's 'axis of evil' and Bush enlisted Saddam Hussein alongside the worst dictators of the world such as Hitler and Stalin. The implication of the discourse is that attention is moved from the environmental and humanitarian problems to the political arena. When articles state that Saddam Hussein is responsible for the destruction of the 'Garden of Eden' the reader is left with the impression that Saddam Hussein is the devil personified. In this way, the discursive construction of environmental destruction can be seen as part of the legitimising process for the 'liberation of Iraq'. Furthermore, the discourse implies that the removal of Saddam Hussein is the solution to the problems, as seen in the following quote from The Guardian published a week before the war, on March 12, 2003 (Campbell, 2003):

> Return to Eden: Plan to restore ancient Iraqi marshlands drained by Saddam.
>
> At the end of the first Gulf war, the marshlands of southern Iraq were drained in what was widely seen as retaliation by Saddam Hussein for the failed upraising of the Marsh Arabs, around 200,000 of whom subsequently fled the region. Now experts in wetland rehabilitation are actively exploring the possibility of restoring the region and turning it into a world heritage site. Discussing the future of the ancient marshlands at the moment is inevitably a delicate business. It presupposes the removal of President Saddam and, therefore, a war.

This Eden discourse even spread to UNEP's homepage (UNEP, 2003a). Two days after the war had begun, a press release declared that: "'Garden of Eden" in Southern Iraq Likely to Disappear completely in Five Years Unless Urgent Action Taken'. As mentioned, UNEP first drew attention to the environmental problems in the Iraqi marshes in the 'Mesopotamia Report' from

May 2001 without pointing to the regime. Just like the Mesopotamia Report, the press release does not mention Saddam Hussein by name. Instead the executive director, Klaus Toepfer, refers to the need for making a full environmental assessment including projects and dams upstream. Hence, UNEP uses the 'Garden of Eden' metaphor without reproducing the whole Eden discourse.

The Eden metaphor was also embraced by the occupation forces in spring 2003. When British forces handed over control of the Al-Qurna area in southern Iraq to the Danish forces, the two Danish camps were named Camp Eden and Camp Yggdrasil respectively. In Norse mythology, Yggdrasil, also called the World Tree, is the giant ash tree that shelters and links all the worlds, i.e. heaven, earth, and hell. Hence, this name, although with Scandinavian reference, maintains the image of southern Iraq as a mythical place.

It is seen that the two discourses are not in conflict. Rather the Eden discourse has taken over from the Mesopotamia discourse and hence has become the dominant discourse in post-war tales of the marshes. The Eden discourse can absorb the ideas of sustainability and 'living in harmony with nature' – after all this is what we perceive the Garden of Eden to be like; a sustainable environment where the first people lived in harmony with nature. Both discourses are constructed outside the media that reproduce them. When the terms 'Eden' and 'Mesopotamia' are used, references are made to a deeper past, implying both pastoral idyll and high culture, as a way to criticize the present destruction of the marshlands and eviction of its inhabitants.

Discussion

How have newspaper articles affected our understanding of the Ma'dan and the marshes? The two aspects of the problem – the demise of the marshes and the plight of the Marsh Arabs – have been presented in different ways and likewise the solutions.

Until the publication of the Mesopotamia report by UNEP in 2001, only few newspaper and magazine articles on the issue can be found.[28] UNEP's report, however, received relatively wide newspaper coverage. As mentioned, UNEP's emphasis was on the environmental destruction of

[28] Some exceptions are J.R. Hilterman and F. Pearce, who wrote for *Middle East Report* and *New Scientists* respectively (Hilterman, 1993; Pearce, 1993) and A. North, who wrote pieces for *Geographical Magazine* and *The Middle East* (North, 1993, 1994).

the marshes. The destruction of the Ma'dan way of life is subsequent to the environmental destruction (UNEP, 2001: 1):

> The disintegration of the Marsh Arab society, a unique community that has lived in the marshlands for more than five millennia, underlines a vivid human dimension to this environmental disaster.

The recommendations made reflect this focus. UNEP suggests international pressure in order to catalyse regional cooperation between the riparian countries. In the report, the demise of the marshes is perceived as a transboundary problem necessitating geo-political solutions (UNEP, 2001). This perspective is reflected in much of the media coverage of 2001 (e.g. The Seattle Times[29], The Guardian[30], New Scientist[31]).

Within 2002-2003, the focus changed – both in the media and in the wider debate – from the environment to the people. Today, in 2004, headlines and hearings concern the Marsh Arabs and not the marshes. When the emphasis is on the Ma'dan people and not the environment, the whole problem complex changes. While desiccation of the marsh environment can be ascribed to a number of the hydro-political decisions made in the catchment area of the Euphrates and Tigris Rivers, the responsibility for the atrocity against the Marsh Arabs is Saddam Hussein's. In this way, Saddam and his regime come up front and the regional perspective is toned down. Regime change becomes a solution to the Marsh Arab problem.

This discourse was applied by the U.S. Government as far back as May 2002 as it can be seen in an editorial entitled 'Brutality against southern Iraqis' from The United States Government's International Broadcasting bureau (USIBB, 2002):

> …in 1991, Saddam Hussein launched a project to dry up Iraq's southern marshes. Iraqi forces burned or bulldozed thousands of homes and farms. Many people were killed. Over the past decade, more than eighty percent of the one-quarter million Marsh Arabs have been driven from their villages. Most are now refugees, including nearly one-hundred thousand living in a camp in Iran. […] Governments that violate citizens' rights are also likely to threaten their neighbors. Clearly, this is the case with

[29] See article in The Seattle Times (2001).

[30] See article by T. Radford (2001) in The Guardian.

[31] See article by F. Pearce (2001) in New Scientist.

> Iraq, which has invaded both Iran and Kuwait over the past two decades. Moreover, Iraq continues to support terrorists and seek weapons of mass destruction. For these reasons, the U.S. is, in the words of Secretary of State Colin Powell, "examining options with respect to regime change, because the people of the… world and the people of Iraq will be better off with a new regime".

As noted by an anonymous researcher in an article in Chicago Tribune, the suffering of the Marsh Arabs helped provide Washington a humanitarian justification for the war to topple Hussein (Salopek, 2003). In January 2003, the Human Rights Watch issued a briefing paper on *The Iraqi Government Assault on the Marsh Arabs*. Here, the organisation pointed out the failure of the international community to act throughout the 1990s in spite of available information of the plight of the Marsh Arabs and the demise of their environment (HRW, 2003). This perspective is not present in the newspaper articles concerned with the Marsh Arabs issued around and after the 2003, 2nd Gulf War. Thereby, the human suffering is used directly or indirectly to legitimise the war without questioning the role of the international community during the preceding twelve years. This provides a static and local understanding of the problem complex.

Likewise, by employing metaphors such as 'Eden' and 'Mesopotamia', both discourses convey a static image of the Ma'dan and the marshes. This leaves little room for a dynamic approach towards understanding the past and providing solutions for the future. The Ma'dan have not pursued the same way of life in the same geographical area for 5,000 years as the discourses imply. Most of the popular articles written in 2001-04, provide a narrative of the Marsh Arabs as a people who have lived in isolation, almost untouched by modernity until Saddam Hussein's plans in the early 1990s. In one of the few articles from the 1980s, "The Marsh Arabs revisited" from *Saudi Aramco World* (Spencer, 1982), the picture is quite different. The author describes a 'conservative' community in change, benefiting from electricity, buying rice from Texas and thereby abandoning self-sufficiency – hence a community marked by modernity. In contrast, the Eden and Mesopotamia discourses leave us with the impression that the Ma'dan will continue their way of life and to live in harmony with nature if the marshes are rehabilitated. Besides ignoring the problems associated with nature rehabilitation, the political and institutional problems associated with repatriating the Ma'dan are downplayed and it is uncertain whether they want to return (see e.g. a survey in Coast, 2003). We cannot turn back time; this means that the Ma'dan are part of the post-Saddam Hussein Iraqi reality. The Baath regime began draining the marshes under the pretext of providing 'development'. However, the present situation in the marsh area is best described as 'underdeveloped' in terms of education, health facilities, etc. Moreover, the Ma'dan belong to the Shia-Muslim majority and are hence at the centre of the power struggle taking place in Iraq after the fall of Saddam Hussein. These issues were pointed

out in 2002 already, in a briefing paper on internally displaced people in Iraq the authors further raise the notice that it will be difficult for any Iraqi government to choose nature rehabilitation over oil production in the marsh land (Fawcett and Tanner, 2002).

Finally, it should be mentioned that in the report *United Nations Inter-Agency Assessment of Vulnerable Groups. Part I: Marsh Arabs* based on a UN mission in June 2003, warnings are made against providing special assistance focussing on the Marsh Arab community. In the report, it is argued that special aid could 'encourage hostilities between the Marsh Arabs, surrounding host communities and other sizable vulnerable groups who in essence have similar needs' (UNOHCI, 2003: 5). With the increased media interest up to and after the war, the plight of Marsh Arabs has received attention beyond the international aid community. While humanitarian assistance is greatly needed, the narrative of the Marsh Arabs as a unique people with special links to a remote history, inhabiting the Garden of Eden provides them with more legitimate claims for aid, which creates unnecessary boundaries between the Ma'dan and their surrounding communities. Rehabilitation of the marshes cannot change what has happened. The Ma'dan way of life has already been destroyed. At present, it is uncertain how many Ma'dan want to return to the marshes and take up their ancient livelihood. The isolation of the community no longer exists; people have been abroad and may have developed needs and wants that are different from the livelihoods they once pursued. As noted by professor Victor Tanner, who has studied internally displaced people of Iraq, the Marsh Arabs 'should not be held hostage to some romantic notion of a return to the Garden of Eden' (Fuller, 2003). Tanner further emphasised that the Ma'dan are a disparate group spread all over Iraq and in neighbouring countries all having different views vis-à-vis repatriating.

Concluding remarks

This paper has discussed the 'stories of destruction' concerning the dismay of the Iraqi marshes and the Marsh Arabs as well as the attention which the international community has paid to these problems.

The paper has shown how the destruction of the marshes and the assault on the Ma'dan by and large were of no concern to the international community until the legitimacy of the 2003, 2nd Gulf war was questioned. Then, the published stories of destruction were oblivious of the attitude of the international community throughout the 1990s. Furthermore, the Eden discourse removed the focus from the geo-political character of nature rehabilitation.

In a 1993 Geographical Magazine article, the question was raised why the British and US governments did not bomb the marsh dykes and dams. After all, allied aircraft were flying over the marshes on a daily basis after the implementation of the August 1992 'no-fly zone' (North, 1993). There are no simple answers to that question, but a few suggestions can be put forward: Technically, it would be difficult both because precision bombs are not suitable for removing dykes and because the hydrological consequences of such bombing would be difficult to predict. Also, the allied forces did not want to bomb infrastructure that might become useful in subsequent ground operations – drained marshes are more easily negotiated than swamps. Finally, in the early 1990s, British and US governments did not find the assault on the marshes an important cause as can be seen from the lack of action despite reports presented in the UN security council.

The paper has demonstrated that the hegemony of the two discourses outlined in the previous section does not leave much space for the Ma'dan to pursue the kind of life they find appropriate. This is due to the fact that the claim for assistance to the Ma'dan is legitimized via the so-called sustainable way of life and their continuity with the past. Moreover, the fact that large oil reserves are located in the marsh area may affect environmental rehabilitation. Can a new Iraqi government afford to leave these reserves untouched? Can oil industry and environmental protection be combined? Although the USAID has decided to make marsh rehabilitation part of their programme for post-war Iraq, it is unknown how these conflicting issues will be dealt with.

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