



Photos/Glenda Booth

Above left, the group examined the stem of a river bulrush, a Dyke Marsh plant that is likely in Iraq as well. Sadiq AL-maliki (blue shirt) is chief engineer in the Prime Minister's Office. Above right, Brent Steury, National Park Service, (left), described NPS's Dyke Marsh restoration plan.

Iraqis, Mt. Vernonites Find Common Ground in Dyke Marsh

By **GLENDAC. BOOTH**

Special Writer

The country of Iraq and the Mount Vernon area found common ground, wet ground, that is, on April 14 when an eight-member Iraqi delegation of engineers, hydrologists, geologists, botanists and other scientists visited the Dyke Marsh Wildlife Preserve. The National Park Service (NPS) and the Friends of Dyke Marsh hosted the group, which is on a mission to determine if the NPS plans to restore Dyke Marsh might have some lessons for Iraq.

Braving the elements, the group got thoroughly soaked sloshing out the Haul Road trail through nine-foot-wide puddles on a gray, rainy, blustery afternoon. The wind whipped up white caps on the roiling Potomac River and most birds, waterfowl and wildlife were invisible, probably taking refuge from the steady downpour. But the group took it in stride because they were in Dyke Marsh to discuss wetlands and after all, wetlands are all about water.

In the 1990s, former Iraqi Prime Minister Saddam Hussein ordered the draining of the country's marshes in Basrah and Dhi Qar provinces and dikes were built on some of the Tigris River's tributaries. Iraqi marshlands, once the site of the Mesopotamian civilization, are of worldwide renown. "The Iraqi Marshlands constitute the largest wetland ecosystem in the Middle East," notes the United Nations Environment Programme's website.

Once drained, plants and animals disap-

peared and around 100,000 marshland Arabs fled or were forcefully exiled. Rising salinity is also killing aquatic life and blocking the return of palm groves and water buffalos. Other challenges: competitive demands for agricultural irrigation, sewage dumping and water allocation in the northern provinces to ensure sufficient water flow to the marshes in the south.

In 2003, with Hussein gone from power, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, the U.S. Agency for International Development, non-governmental organizations and others started work to replenish the marshlands with water from the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers. Today, Iraq's wetlands are 30 percent of their historic capacity, according to the U.S. State Department.

Mount Vernonite and Park Service biologist, Brent Steury, explained that the dredging of Dyke Marsh from 1940 to 1972 that hauled away over 180 acres destabilized the wetland ecosystem so that today only 50 acres of wetlands remain and the marsh is not self-sustaining. Citing a 2010 U.S. Geological Survey study, he told the delegation that storms exacerbate erosion and that NPS has completed a restoration plan.

Even in the drenching rain, the visitors delighted in comparing plants in Dyke Marsh to those in Iraq's marshes. "There are no date palms here," a botanist joked, but the group admired the river bulrush's triangular stem, a plant also found in Iraq. They observed that in Iraq, phragmites, a

tall wetland grass with a bushy seedhead, dominates many wetlands and is native. Steury explained that in the Potomac River system, phragmites is considered an invasive and NPS tries to control it. Iraq has many of the same genera of plants as Dyke Marsh, Steury believes.

Sadiq AL-maliki, Chief Engineer in the Prime Minister's Office, said, "We are advocates for the environment in Iraq and especially marshes. We support the protection of the environment. Our goal is the same as yours, to return some places to their original condition."

The group will visit nearby Jug Bay, Lothian, Maryland; the Everglades National Park, Florida; and wetlands projects near New Orleans and Lafayette, Louisiana. They will also explore western water management in a visit to Las Vegas and the Colorado River Basin, a desert environment that poses similar challenges to habitats in Iraq. Their visit is sponsored by the State Department's International Visitor Leadership Program, a professional exchange program.

On April 15, the day following their visit, the Washington Post headlined, "For Obama and Iraqi's Abadi [the Prime Minister], the Beginning of a Complicated Relationship." It wasn't complicated at all in Dyke Marsh on April 14. Americans and Iraqis alike were intrigued by the science and value of wetlands with no diplomatic complications.