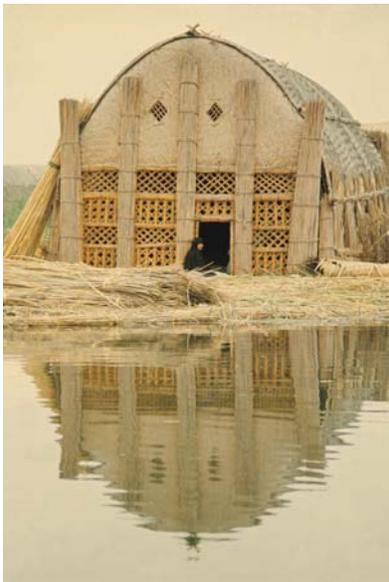


Stacey Ravel Abarbanel, staceyra@arts.ucla.edu
310/825-4288

For Immediate Use
October 27, 2008

‘Iraqi Marshlands Then and Now’ Opens at Fowler Museum at UCLA on Dec 14



Formed by the overflow of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers, the marshes of southern Iraq once constituted the largest wetlands in western Eurasia and have been inhabited since at least the time of the Sumerians in the late sixth millennium, BCE. As recently as the mid-1970s the marshes encompassed six thousand square miles and supported a thriving community of 250,000–400,000 indigenous inhabitants. In the mid-1970s photographer Nik Wheeler documented their way of life, and his remarkable photographs from that era are the focus of *Iraqi Marshlands Then and Now: Photographs by Nik Wheeler* on display at the Fowler Museum at UCLA from December 14, 2008–March 22, 2009.

Commonly known as “Marsh Arabs,” the herding and fishing people of the Iraqi marsh region lived on islands made of mud and compacted reeds. Even their houses and community halls were made of reeds gathered from the marsh, creating

the beautiful vernacular architecture captured in Wheeler’s photographs. Also on display are intimate scenes of everyday life in the area, along with majestic overview images of the region taken via aerial photography during Wheeler’s second trip there in 1975, when the government provided him with access to a Russian-built helicopter to tour the area.

In the 1980s Iraqi President Saddam Hussein’s engineers began building massive canals to drain the marshes, ostensibly to bring development to the region but also as a means of controlling the local population. Following the end of the 1991 Gulf War, the Shiites of southern Iraq (who include the Marsh Arabs) rebelled against the Sunni-dominated regime. Hussein retaliated with a campaign to decimate the predominant Shiite indigenous population of the marshes, bombarding villages, killing livestock and mining the water with explosives. By the time he was overthrown in 2003, fewer than 80,000 people were left in the marshes and water covered less than twenty percent of the original area.

2-2-2 'Iraqi Marshlands Then and Now' Opens at Fowler Museum at UCLA on Dec 14

Efforts are now underway to rehabilitate a portion of the marshlands, and recent photographs by Mudhafar Salim show some of the early results. Salim is a researcher for Nature Iraq and senior author of the Arabic-language field guide *Birds of Iraq*.

Nik Wheeler's wide-ranging photographic career includes war coverage, international politics, and travel photography. He made his first trip to the marshes of Iraq in 1974, on an assignment for *National Geographic*. After the publication of that article, written by Gavin Young, Wheeler and Young collaborated on the book *Return to the Marshes*, published in 1977 by Collins. Wheeler is based in Santa Barbara, California.

Iraqi Marshlands Then and Now will be on view in the Fowler Museum's Goldenberg Galleria. The Fowler is open Wednesdays through Sundays, from noon to 5 p.m.; and on Thursdays, from noon until 8 p.m. The museum is closed Mondays and Tuesdays. The Fowler Museum, part of UCLA's School of the Arts and Architecture, is located in the north part of the UCLA campus. Admission is free. Parking is available for a maximum of \$9 in Lot 4. For more information, the public may call 310/825-4361 or visit fowler.ucla.edu.

Related Programs:

Sunday, January 11, 2009 2 pm

Photographer **Nik Wheeler** and **Azzam Alwash**, the director of Eden Again/Nature Iraq program, discuss the history and present-day conditions of the Iraqi marshlands with UCLA anthropology professor **Susan Slyomovics**. Co-sponsored by the Center for Near Eastern Studies.

-UCLA-