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3/29/2003 7:44:00 AM -0500

Newstrack: A new survey says a majority of Norwegians want a referendum on the separation of church and state. New Orleans Police Superintendent Warren Riley says the shooting death of a knife-wielding man by police was justified. The hotel at the Disneyland Resort was evacuated after a Christmas tree caught fire Wednesday morning, but no major injuries were reported. Investigators Wednesday examined a 53-foot concrete beam that fell onto Interstate 70 southwest of Pittsburgh, closing a 4-mile stretch of the road. Israel shelled a newly declared buffer zone in northern Gaza Wednesday after warning Palestinians not to enter the area. Delta Air Lines pilots have approved a proposal to cut their pay by 14 percent. An Indiana man claims hundreds of dollars have been stolen from his bank account and police said it was done from Russia. The renovation of a Boston courthouse is coming under fire as contractors and the state battle in court and judges claim it is too lavish. A Texas court said it would consider whether to hear an appeal from U.S. Rep. Tom DeLay, R-Texas, regarding money-laundering charges. A British Airways flight from New York to London was diverted to Wales for an emergency landing after smoke was found in the cockpit.

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10 EU nations to miss Kyoto emissions goal

By BRANDON THURNER
12/28/2005 5:04:00 PM -0500

Ten EU countries who have attacked the Bush administration's stance on global warming are failing to meet Kyoto Protocol targets for reducing emissions.

Eat To Live: Farmed or wild salmon?

By JULIA WATSON
UPI Food Writer
12/28/2005 1:38:00 PM -0500

Cooks who've had their fill of cooking these past few weeks -- and diners who've had their fill of celebratory food -- will turn to the simplicity of fish.

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Science & Technology (no pub)

Blue Planet: Paradise lost -- again

By DAN WHIPPLE
UPI Science News

Most of the thousands of American soldiers crossing the desert of southeastern Iraq on their way toward Baghdad probably don't know they are crossing the location of the biblical Garden of Eden -- and the site of a present-day environmental tragedy.

As soon as the war ends and humanitarian relief begins, a band of scientists and environmentalists is poised to attempt to save a priceless ecosystem and a treasure of human history.

Mesopotamia -- literally, the "Land Between the (Tigris and Euphrates) Rivers" -- is the cradle of civilization. The area is thought by archaeologists to be the spot where agriculture was first practiced, allowing humans to abandon hazardous hunting and gathering for the more stable pursuit of farming. As far as scholars can tell, it is the traditional land where Adam and Eve dwelt.

The area of southern Iraq bordering Iran -- the "Fertile Crescent," as it is known still -- was not always the trackless desert waste now seen on TV and described in news reports. In fact, as recently as 1991, according to the United Nations Environmental Program, the marshlands extended over their original area of 15,000 to 20,000 square kilometers (5,800 to

7,700 square miles).

"When the soldiers crossed the bridge at An Nasiriyah, 15 years ago, you would have seen an endless sea of water, green and blue," Suzie Alwash, project director of the Eden Again Project of the Iraq Foundation, told UPI's Blue Planet. "On TV today, you see an endless sea of desert -- it's heartbreaking."

Extensive damming by Iran and, especially, by Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein has led to the drying of over 90 percent of these ancient marshes, leading to what UNEP has described as "one of the world's greatest environmental disasters."

The organization's executive director, Klaus Toepfer, said UNEP has a unit ready to aid Iraq with marsh restoration efforts as soon as the coalition military commanders permit it. But while the U.S. State Department has supported some studies on the marsh region, the UN's role in post-war Iraq remains unclear, given the tensions between the United States and that international body.

In a written statement, Toepfer said UNEP's Post Conflict Assessment Unit, which has carried out successful environmental studies and drawn up action plans for the Balkans and, more recently, Afghanistan and the Occupied Palestinian Territories, stands ready to assist in any project to restore the wetlands.

State department officials were not available to comment on the future of the marsh restoration.

"The loss of the Mesopotamian marshlands is one of the world's worst human-engineered environmental disasters," Adlai Amor, spokesman for the World Resources Institute, told UPI. "This was historically what Biblical scholars looked at as the likely site of the garden of Eden."

The marshlands were the home to the "Marsh Arabs" -- the Ma'dan group of tribes -- inheritors of a culture that stretches back more than 5,000 years toward the dawn of human history.

In addition to the millennia-old culture, the marshlands are critical habitat for numerous endangered and threatened species. Yet a UNEP study released at the World Water Forum on March 22 in Kyoto said 3 percent of the marshes have disappeared in the last two years.

They actually are composed of three marsh systems -- al-Hammer marsh, Central marsh and al-Hawizeh marsh. According to satellite images, only a small portion of al-Hawizeh marsh, which straddles the Iran-Iraq border, remains and it could disappear completely within five years, according to UNEP.

WRI's Amor said wildlife experts fear three species native to the area have gone extinct: a subspecies of the smooth-coated otter, the bandicoot rat and the gunther. Threatened by the decline are the African darter and sacred ibis, the only populations in the Mideast, along with the Iraqi populations of the pygmy cormorant and goliath heron.

"Since the marshes are important as a staging and wintering area for migratory birds on the Western Siberia-Caspian-Nile flyway from the Arctic to southern Africa," Amor told UPI, "it has put at risk at least 66 species of birds. The global population of the endemic Iraq babbler, the endemic Basra reed babbler and the Dalmatian pelican may have already crashed."

Other wildlife threatened by the war include the cheetah, ferruginous duck, spotted eagle, imperial eagle and Euphrates soft shell turtle.

Draining the marshes has been under way since at least the 1950s as the upper basin nations -- primarily Turkey, Iran and Iraq -- have dammed the tributaries for water and power. But the problem reached crisis proportions after the 1991 Gulf War. When U.S. forces withdrew, President George H.W. Bush urged local dissidents to rebel against Saddam Hussein.

The Marsh Arabs did. When Bush failed to follow through on his promise of assistance, they were brutally crushed by the regime and the desertification of their homeland began in earnest.

According to Human Rights Watch, "Numbering some 250,000 people as recently as 1991, the Marsh Arabs today are believed to number fewer than 40,000 in their ancestral homeland. Many have been arrested, 'disappeared,' or executed.

Most have become refugees abroad or are internally displaced in Iraq as a result of Iraqi oppression. The population and culture of the Marsh Arabs, who have resided continuously in the marshlands for more than 5,000 years, are being eradicated."

Alwash's Eden Again Project is dedicated to restoring the Mesopotamian marshes in a post-Saddam Iraq. But she said this means doing more than simply flooding the area again. The group has convened a number of wetlands experts to consider the problem. They have developed a plan for "the first couple of years," she said.

"First, we need to make it safe for humans," she told UPI. "There are going to be ordnance and poisons and toxins that have been introduced into the marshlands," some deliberately and some because the rivers have served as an open sewer for the past 15 years.

"Some former lakes have turned into salt pans and there may be a two-foot-thick salt crust," Alwash continued. "If you put water back in there, you're just creating a saline lake that nothing can live in. And some (lakes) have been desiccated for over a decade and may not react properly when they are rehydrated."

In addition, there will not be enough water available, because of upstream damming, to return the area to its original state. That poses an interesting philosophical question: What, exactly, constitutes the "original state" of a 5,000 year old culture that stemmed from Eden?



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