

## World Wetlands Day 2011 in Jordan

### Report from the Royal Society for the Conservation of Nature

In 1977, Jordanian Government joined the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands, and declared Azraq wetland as the first Jordanian Ramsar Site with an area of 7,372 hectares, mainly because of the wetland's significant and global importance of migrant birds. Part of the site was declared soon in 1978 as a protected area named as Azraq Wetland Reserve and managed by the Royal Society for the Conservation of Nature.

Since then, the wetland was challenged by the over-pumping of the Azraq aquifer groundwater, that is the only permanent water source fed into the wetland, water level has steadily dropped, resulting in extreme depletion and erosion of the wetland area. By 1993, the wetland was virtually destroyed. In 1994, RSCN began a restoration and rehabilitation (GEF/UNDP funded) efforts and managed to restore a significant portion of the site resembling minor percentage of the original wetland.

In celebration of World Wetlands Day, on Saturday, February 19, 2011, the Royal Society for the Conservation of Nature (RSCN) organised *World Wetlands Day 2011* event at Azraq Wetland Reserve, welcoming over 200 participants including RSCN Friends and Members, as well as 45 schoolchildren from the surrounding villages (Southern and Northern Azraq)

Sponsored by Arab Bank and Sama Water, the event was designed to raise awareness of the global importance of the site, and attract interest in Azraq Wetland, as well as to bring decision-makers' attention to such importance and interest in hopes that strong actions could be taken to save the area.

Five themes were organised through the event. Participants started with a special tour in the Visitor Center guided by the site manager Mr. Omar Shoshan, who presented in brief the history of Azraq, including the excessive water pumping, as well as RSCN's efforts to restore and rehabilitate the site. During this tour, participants also learned more about the bird ringing initiative, which allow scientists across the world to better understanding of migration patterns through Azraq.

At the second stage, participants were given the opportunity to add their touch to painted murals, which depicted the sites of Azraq Wetland. Birds, water buffalo, and, of course, the endemic Azraq Killifish all found their places on the colourful canvases.

Then, participants were moved to the Birdhide, where Mr. Hussein al Hamoud, a senior guide at the reserve, pointed out the importance of the wetland for migrant and resident birds, including Egrets, Herons, and Passerines.

Participants ended their tour by the final stage where they were introduced to the endemic killifish *Aphanius sirhani* conservation programme. The conservation specialist Mr. Nashat Hamidan explained more about the species. Using electrofishing techniques; he sampled few individuals to explain more about the species, and the challenges it is facing including alien species and habitat loss.

An entertainment break was given to the participants including eight eco-games, all designed to familiarise participants with wildlife aspects and themes of Azraq.

At the end, participants shared their ideas of conserving such wetland, and hopefully, left Azraq back home with unforgotten memories, and understanding of the values of such unique desert wetland, that should be supported only to survive.

(Enclosed some photos)



T- Shirts in their way to be distributed to the participants.



Mr. Yehya Khalid, the Director General of RSCN welcoming the participants.



Dividing the participants into groups



Painting



Painting



Mr. Omar Shoshan the site manager at the visitor centre introduces the participants to the site.



Eco-games



Azraq Killifish stage, where participants were introduced to the species and the challenges it is facing.



At the end, winners at the wetland competition were awarded.



Group photograph