

TELLURIDE
MOUNTAINFILM

Marshland Dreams



Directed by John Antonelli

Once the largest ecosystem in the Middle East and the rich homeland of Sumerians for millennia, the Mesopotamian Marshes were destroyed systematically by Saddam Hussein so that they couldn't shelter rebel forces. Drained and burned, the vital wetland habitat seemed lost forever. Iraqi exile Azzam Alwash, who spoke about his work at Mountainfilm in 2004 and 2008, never accepted that this magical place of his childhood could simply cease to exist. For the past 10 years, he has wheedled, cajoled, encouraged and coerced his countrymen to help restore the marsh's sustainably. (USA, 2013, 5 minutes)

Discussing the Film:

The following questions are intended to spark discussion and activities related to both the content and storytelling elements of this particular film.

1. What were some of the most interesting images from *Marshland Dreams*? What sights and sounds do you remember the most about the film?
2. Do you think Azzam Alwash is an interesting subject for the film? Why or why not? What words would you use to describe him?
3. If you had a choice, what natural environment would you want to film and what would you hope to discover?
4. Imagine there is a war in your hometown. What wilderness areas in your own community would be threatened? What would you do to try to save those areas?
5. During the War in Iraq, Saddam was responsible for intentionally destroying the marshlands. Since it was not explained in the film, why do you think he did this?

Extensions:

1. **WATCH:** Share the *Marshland Dreams* film with your friends by watching it online at Mountainfilm's site: <http://www.mountainfilm.org/film/marshland-dreams>. Watch more short films about different environmental and conservation movements in Iraq today on Nature Iraq's website: <http://www.natureiraq.org/videos.html>.
2. **WATCH:** Check out the filmmaking company Mill Valley Film Group, created by filmmaker John Antonelli and his partner Will Parrinello, to view their other films and find out more about their projects: <http://www.mvfg.com/>.
3. **READ:** About 2013 Goldman Environmental prize winner Azzam Alwash, his life in Iraq and his work with the marshlands project: <http://www.goldmanprize.org/recipient/azzam-alwash>. Also, watch Azzam Alwash's TED Talk: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fpa7OPmKLiw>.
4. **DO:** Teachers: Break your students into groups and have each group research a Goldman Environmental Prize winner: <http://www.goldmanprize.org/recipients/current>. Have them identify environmental crusaders in their own community, then have each group create unique awards to present to these champions as a way of saying thanks.

Filmmaker Conversation:

John Antonelli, director of *Marshland Dreams*

Why is environmental filmmaking important to you?

John: I've always had a disposition to personal concern on environmental issues. We had the good fortune of connecting up with the Goldman Environmental Prize about twelve years ago. We had done similar kinds of projects like the Global Fund for Women. So, every year, we've gotten to do six small portraits of the people the Goldman Foundation has chosen for the award. That experience has deepened our personal commitment to environmental issues. We now spend at least half of our year working on those environmental stories and the other half of the year expanding those stories into longer films. We've expanded *Marshland Dreams* into an eight-minute version and we're looking at growing that to an even longer project because people are responding to it so positively.

What was the filming process like? How did you create the story?

John: The funny thing about that story was, when my partners and I got the list and locations of the Goldman winners, {Azzam Alwash} was not even on my short list. My partner was supposed to do that one and I had to go because he hurt his shoulder. I knew very little about the project when I got there. We had a really difficult time getting out of airport customs in Iraq. The city of Bazra was not welcoming. There is a heavy military presence and there was a dangerous and desolate feeling. We drove out to the Nature Iraq headquarters, only two hours outside of Bazra, and as soon as we got there, it was like an oasis. The community was warm and welcoming and colorful. The major surprise was the next day, when we went out into the marshes with Azzam, we got to experience the incredible beauty and majesty of that place. Here's this guy who made this epic contribution to restoring the habitat there. We filmed for five days and I got to look at it with fresh eyes and an empty mind. I was learning about it minute by minute. But when you know the story of the marshes, and you're sitting in a boat among them, it's almost impossible to fathom that it was all completely destroyed during the war.

How important is finding a character like Azzam to film?

John: We're always blown away by these incredible Goldman winners that we are asked to film. *Marshland Dreams* comes to mind as really one of my favorite Goldman stories. Maybe it's because I didn't go in with much of an expectation, but if Azzam hadn't done what he had done, those marshlands would have been gone forever. In five days we were filming with Azzam in those marshes, as far as your eyes could see, you could see the impact that he had on that environment. It's so extreme between the flat empty dryness of Bazra and the difference in what Azzam was able to restore. It's one of the most significant stories of all the Goldman stories I've done.

In your opinion, what made Azzam successful at bringing these marshes back?

John: It's really interesting. Azzam is an engineer and he was able to look at where the levees were constructed by Saddam's military on the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. He was able to look and assess how, if you broke some of the levees, the marshes would come back. He's a dynamic, irrepressible person. It would be hard to get in his way. The fact that he would even go back to Iraq to take that on tells you how courageous he was. It was his childhood place. We all have that. When I was a kid, I grew up in Massachusetts and we used to go to Cape Cod for vacation. Cape Cod was my place. For Azzam, as a kid who grew up in the desert, to be able to go to the marsh with his father built a deep personal connection. He says in the film, "Dream and dream big." Everyone was telling him it couldn't be done, but he couldn't accept that. He couldn't let go of the idea that the marshes were gone forever. When someone like that has a dream, he is either going to die doing it, or he's going to get it done. Fortunately for the people of Iraq, and all of us, he stuck to his dream and it came true.

Do you think the film has had an impact? Do you feel it is successful?

John: Yeah, when we did the film, it was Azzam's "icing on the cake" idea to turn the marshlands into a national park. The reeds in the marshes are such an essential part of the culture there — it would be like taking all the cornfields out of the Midwest. Some of those homes in the marshlands are completely built out of reeds. Part of his success is that he's restored a cultural home life to the Marsh Arabs. They had all migrated out of that area, and then when the marshes came back, they came back with them. The Goldman Prize likes to think that the attention that the prizewinners get will help further their cause. Azzam received a bunch of publicity and met a bunch of important people in Washington, DC, and throughout the world, and from that he was able to convince the Iraqi parliament to make it a national park. We hope this film will have a life of its own. In expanding it, we're trying to do more shooting of Azzam's current life in Los Angeles. You know, most people can't even compute that there are environmental activists in Iraq. Most people don't have any sense of there being that kind of place in Iraq. It's wonderful to be able to share that story with people, as a filmmaker. My experience with Azzam was so joyful, and to bring that back was really amazing.

What piece of advice would you give to a student who wants to get into filmmaking?

John: I would say the biggest piece of advice is to really look for a story to tell that matters to you, and tell that story. And don't rush to completion. Don't think you need to finish it for a deadline to Sundance. The director Robert Altman said when he's at that stage where he's not sure if he's succeeded or not with a film, he sits down in the screening room with people he admires and shows them the film. Their feedback is important to him, but more important is how he feels when he is sitting

in the room with them. He is just listening to his gut. That was really good advice.

What's your next project?

John: I'm doing a piece in Hawaii that's about a movement to restore a lot of the traditional cultural and agricultural practices. The Hawaiian way of eating has been diminished by western culture imposing our diet onto them with disastrous effect on their health. It's centered around breadfruit, which used to be a very traditional part of the Hawaiian diet, which has been seriously curtailed over the recent years. There are a lot of rituals and practices based around it. I am also working on a couple of the other Goldman stories at various stages. One is about two prize winners from Africa. It's a story about indigenous peoples' rights. Land rights are often violated in the name of conservation. That film is playing at the Heartland Film Fest next month.