

# We all come from there.

## Tribute to Wetlands of the Middle East and Africa - World Wetlands Day Poland'22

Open online conference, 5 February 2022, 11am-4pm.

Organization: Wetland Conservation Centre (CMok), Warsaw.

### Introduction – why Polish WWD about the Middle East and African wetlands?

February 2 - the anniversary of the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands (1971) has for years been an opportunity around the world to raise awareness about the values, threats, and needs for protection and restoration of wetlands. As the Wetland Conservation Centre (CMok), we have been organizing the Polish WWD celebration for over 15 years. We created a forum to talk about Polish mires, rivers, and lakes, their specific problems, and ways to support their effective protection. But this year we will be silent about wetlands in Poland during WWD. They are in mourning.

Over the past few months, the border between Poland and Belarus, marked by mires, swamps, and rivers, has been the scene of drama for thousands of people, who left their homes in search of a better future. One of the reasons why people from different countries of the Middle East and Africa take huge risks of migration and find themselves on the border of our country is the changes in the environment caused by global warming, water shortages, and soil depletion. These have been compounded by economic and social factors, conflicts, and persecution. The fact that the migrants and refugees have become a tool of cynical political struggle adds to the tragedy of this situation. One of the most beautiful and naturally valuable areas of our country has become a witness of suffering and death. Hiding from persecution and pushbacks, several people died of cold, hunger, and exhaustion in the swamps of Białowieża Forest. Others lost their lives while crossing the Bug River. Many others owe their lives to the residents of the border areas and volunteers who keep helping people who are in a death trap every day – in this place let us acknowledge their priceless efforts.

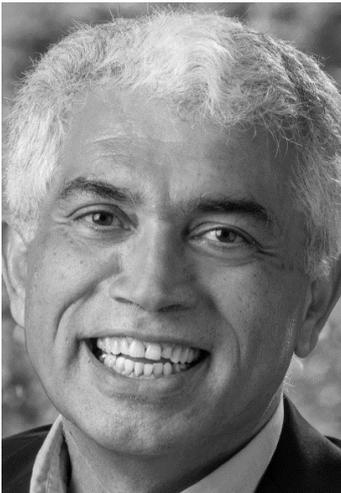
In an act of humanitarian solidarity and refusing to accept the above-described situation, we decided to dedicate this year's World Wetlands Day event to all the people who suffer and die in the Polish and Belarusian wetlands. This year's WWD conference will be all about the Middle East and Africa's wetlands, and the people associated with them. That is where we all came from.



# Our speakers



**Tamara Abdul Hadi** (Iraq / Canada) – Iraqi photographer whose work is concerned with the historic and contemporary representation of her own culture, in its diversity. Her work has been published in *The New York Times*, *The Guardian*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Financial Times*, *The National*, *Huck Magazine*, *VICE*, *Slate* and more and exhibited in UAE, Lebanon, Kuwait, France, the UK, Sweden, Spain, Hungary, Canada and the US. Abdul Hadi was a founding member of *Rawiya Collective*, a photography co-operative of female photographers in the Middle East. On February 5<sup>th</sup> Tamara will show photographs she made over last years in Mesopotamian wetlands Al Ahwar, reporting from the contemporary life of their inhabitants, called Marsh Arabs.



**Dr. Azzam Alwash** (Iraq) – Iraqi ecologist and environmental activist, founder of the *Eden Again*, a program to put the spotlight on the drying of the marshes of southern Iraq, under the auspices of the Free Iraq Foundation, where he is a member of the board of directors. Emigrated to USA in 1978, where he obtained Ph.D. in Civil Engineering from the University of Southern California (1988). After the removal of Saddam Hussien, he moved back to Iraq to work on the restoration of the marshes and founded *Nature Iraq*, an Iraqi NGO focusing on the preservation of the environment of Iraq and its cultural heritage. An effort that earned him the Takreem Award in 2011 and The Goldman Environmental Prize for 2013 as well as being designated one of the 100 forward-thinking leaders of the world by the Foreign Policy Group in 2013. Dr. Alwash is working now on issues of water and the environment through *Nature Iraq* and the American University of Iraq in Sulaimani (of which he is a co-founder) to promote the idea of cooperation on water management and making water an instrument of peace rather than the source of tension in the future Middle East.



**Salman Khairalla** (Iraq, Tigris River Protectors Association) – activist involved in conservation and solving conflicts around access to water. As a 15-year-old boy, he fled the civil war in Baghdad and began working for the Iraq Institute (now *Nature Iraq*). As he writes, "a passion for the environment became a refuge from war, ethnic violence, and constant conflict". While still a student at the Department of Environmental Sciences at Kufa University in Najaf, Iraq, Salman Khaitalla took on the coordination of "Save the Tigris", an international civil society campaign to protect Mesopotamia's heritage and water resources from the effects of unsustainable management and climate change. He is also the founder and director of "Humat Dijlah" (Tigris River Defenders Association). Thanks in part to his work, the marshes of southern Iraq were inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List in 2016.



**Dr. Kaveh Madani** (Iran/ USA) – scientist, activist, the Head of the Nexus Research Program at the United Nations University in Dresden (Germany) and a Research Professor at the CUNY Crest Institute of the City College of New York; the former Deputy Head of Iran's Department of Environment (also Iran's Deputy Vice President). He also served as the Vice President of the United Nations Environmental Assembly Bureau from 2017 to 2018. His research and outreach activities have influenced water policy in Iran. He also has played a major role in raising public awareness about Iran's water and environmental problems in recent years. On February 5<sup>th</sup>, Kaveh Madani will join for interview and discussion about what can be done about the looming crisis of a global drought, based on his TEDx talk 'Water: think again'

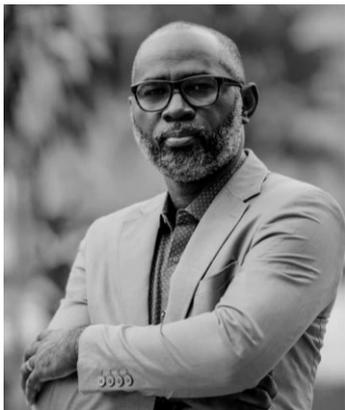
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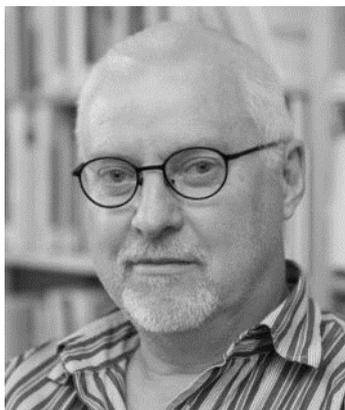
**Dr. Samer Elshehawi** (Egypt / Germany) - is an ecohydrologist and associate researcher at the Greifswald Mire Centre in Germany. Currently, he is the coordinator for the Nile Basin Peatland project and author of 'Groundwater isotopes and ecohydrological analysis of peatland landscapes' (PhD 2019; University of Groningen, the Netherlands) and 'Assessment of Carbon (CO<sub>2</sub>) emissions avoidance potential from the Nile Basin peatlands', which will be the topic of his contribution at our WWD meeting.



**Dr. Karounga Keita** (Mali) – regional director of Wetlands International for the region of African Sahel, in Bamako, Mali. Dr. Karounga Keita has more than 32 years' experiences, either at high level with Mali government or with private sector. He was Sr. Economist and Team Leader/Senior governance Advisor with UNDP in many countries (Mali, Burundi, Burkina Faso, Democratic Republic of Congo) as well as author of many National Sustainable Development Strategies (Congo Brazzaville, Comoros) and Mali 2015 report on Food Security for FAO. Karounga Keita holds a PhD in economics, and did postgraduate studies in political sciences and international relations. On February 5<sup>th</sup>, dr Keita will talk about the impact of wetland degradation on livelihoods and migrations in his region: "Tens of millions of people depend on the vitality of African wetlands. Migration is an established and valued livelihood strategy in the Sahel. The continuing loss and degradation of wetlands is contributing to new and often disruptive migrations, including to Europe."



**Prof. Dr. Ifo Suspense Averti** (Republic of Congo) - associate professor at the University Marien N'GOUABI of Brazzaville where he teaches ecology, forestry and climate science. His research work focuses on the estimation of stocks and fluxes of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions from forest ecosystems of the Republic of Congo. While his main focus is on the remote sensing of deforestation and degradation due to urban growth and its impact on biodiversity and carbon stock, he is also a member of the international research team CongoPeat which is currently working on the understanding of the functioning of tropical peatlands of the Congo Basin. In 2017, he co-authored the Nature publication by Dardie et al. "Age, extent and carbon storage of the central Congo Basin peatland complex", containing the first estimate of the enormous carbon storage of, so-called, Cuvette Centrale peatlands, which will be the main topic of his contribution.



**Prof. Dr. Hans Joosten** (Netherlands / Germany) - Professor Emeritus of Peatland Science and Paleoecology at the University of Greifswald, Germany, partner of the Greifswald Mire Centre, and Secretary General of the International Mire Conservation Group. Author of more than 600 scientific articles and other publications on peatlands. Since 2009 he has been intensively involved in the UNFCCC negotiations and the development of IPCC guidelines, especially on accounting for emissions from drained peatlands, and in FAO in promoting climate-responsible peatland management. In addition to his main interest in peatland ecology and their worldwide conservation, he has for many years been interested in the cultural and historical background of human relationships with wetlands, which is reflected in some of his work, including analyses of perceptions of wetlands in ancient culture and mythology, which will be the main theme of his contribution at our WWD event.



# Program

## 5 February 2022

11.00 Opening of the World Wetlands Day 2022 – **Wiktor Kotowski and Magda Galus** (CMok)

11.05 Refugees on the marshes - testimony of the events on the Polish-Belarusian border.

### 11.15 - 13.45 Wetlands of the Middle East

**Hans Joosten** (Germany / Netherlands, University of Greifswald, International Mire Conservation Group): Marshes and wetlands in the testimony of ancient Middle Eastern cultures.

**Tamara Abdul Hadi** (Iraq / Lebanon / Canada): This was Biblical Eden. Ahwar marshes and their inhabitants.

**Azzam Alwash** (Iraq, Nature Iraq): Is it possible to restore a lost paradise? Origin, degradation and restoration of Mesopotamian wetlands.

**Salman Khairalla** (Iraq, Tigris River Protectors Association): Environmental activism and the search for inspiration.

**Kaveh Madani** (Iran/ USA): Will We Go on a War for Water? (screening of TEDx talk followed by online interview)

After the presentations a panel discussion with session speakers.

### 13.45-14.30 Break

### 14.30-16.00 Wetlands of Africa

**Samer Elshehawi** (Egypt / Germany, Greifswald Mire Centre): Re-discovering papyrus in the Nile. Results of recent peatland inventories in the Nile Basin.

**Karounga Keita** (Mali, Wetlands International - Sahel Office): Wetland degradation and migration in the African Sahel.

**Ifo Suspense Averti** (Republic of Congo, Université Marien Ngouabi): Large peatlands of the Congo Basin and their importance for the global climate.

16.00-17.00 Panel discussion: wetlands, water and peace.

You can watch us on [Facebook](#) and [YouTube](#).

The whole event will be streamed in original (generally English, French for one presentation), as well as with Polish simultaneous interpretation.