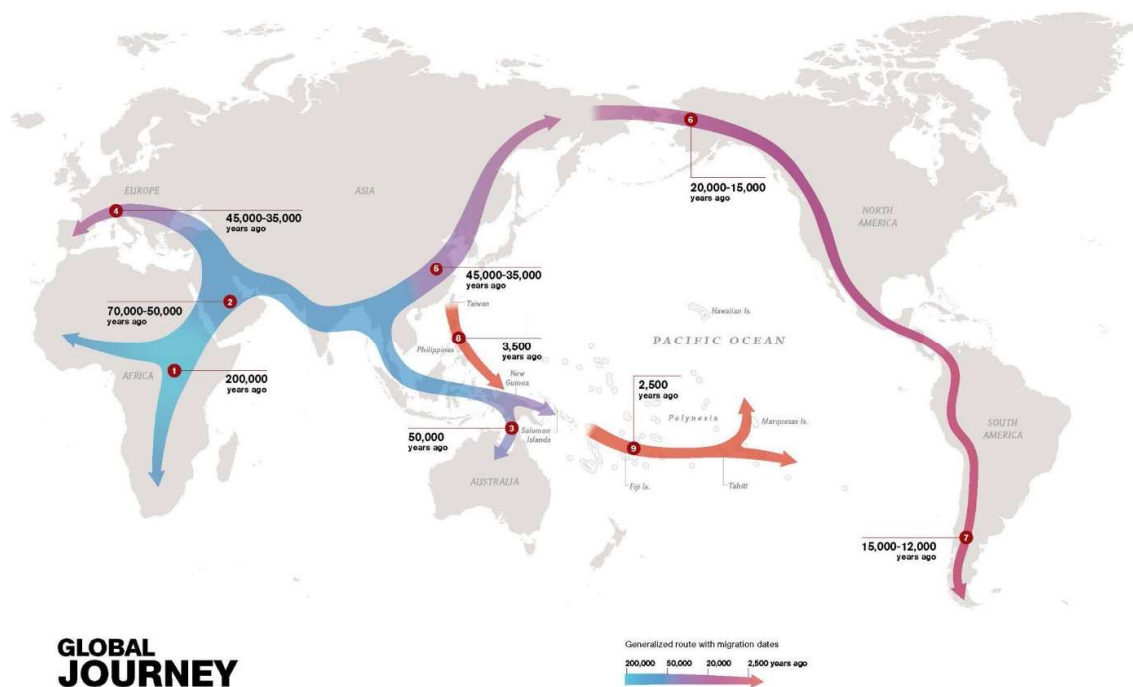


We all come from there.

Tribute to Wetlands of the Middle East and Africa - World Wetlands Day Poland'22. Press pack CMok.

Open online conference, 5 February 2022, 11am-5pm CET, to watch on Fb and Yt.
Organization: Wetland Conservation Centre (CMok), Warsaw.

“Wetlands Action for People and Nature” – the slogan of this year’s World Wetlands Day – is for Poland’s-based NGO “Wetland Conservation Centre” (CMok) the context to talk about the Middle East and African wetlands as the cradle of civilization. The open series of webinars on Saturday, February 5th, is dedicated to refugees and migrants who suffered and died over the last months in wetlands and forests at the Polish-Belarussian border. We invite for a 6-hour-long webinar in which scientists, activists, and artists from Iran, Iraq, Egypt, Republic of Kongo, Mali, as well as European countries, will demonstrate the beauty of wetlands and explain the importance of their protection for nature and people. The meeting can be joined online of Fb and YT at bagna.pl. #WeAllComeFromThere.



Human migration routes and their estimated timing. Source: National Geographic Society¹

World Wetlands Day

World Wetlands Day is celebrated on February 2 to commemorate the anniversary of the signing of the "Convention on Wetlands of International Importance, especially as Wetland Habitat" in 1971 in the Iranian city of Ramsar (also known as the Ramsar Convention). Today, the Ramsar site network is the world's largest network of protected areas, comprising more than 2,400 sites, covering a total area of more than 250 million hectares, or about 13-18% of terrestrial and coastal wetlands. According to the assumptions of the Convention, each Contracting Parties are obliged to protect not only the wetlands included in the "List of Ramsar Sites", but also other valuable water and wetland areas on its territory.

World Wetlands Day 2022

World Wetlands Day has been celebrated since 1997, so it's already the 26th time. This year's holiday is unique because for the first time WWD is officially observed by the UN. The relevant resolutionⁱⁱ of the UN from August 2021 emphasizes that wetlands are crucial for people and nature, given the undeniable natural value of these ecosystems, as well as the contribution they make to sustainable development and human well-being, delivering environmental, climatic ecological, social, economic, scientific, educational, cultural, recreational and aesthetic benefits. The text of the resolution underlines the important role of the Ramsar Convention in ensuring the conservation and wise use of all wetlands through local and national action and international cooperation, and Convention's contribution to achieving sustainable development worldwide. As every year, to mark World Wetlands Day various events are held around the world. To date More than 800 different events have been reported so farⁱⁱⁱ.



World Wetlands Day 2022 – online event organized by the CMok

Outline of the topic: Wetlands of Africa and the Middle East

The title of the meeting, " We All Came from There," reflects the importance that the marshes, rivers and lakes of Africa and the Middle East have played in human history. The below summarises the main topics that Wetlands Day guests will talk about.

- ❖ The origins of our relationship with wetlands dates back to the early Paleolithic. It has long been known that the early settlements of *Homo sapiens* in Africa were located among and near wetlands. A recent study published three years ago in Nature^{iv} situates the beginnings of our evolution directly on paleo-wetlands located 200,000 years ago in what is now Botswana, the remnants of which are the Okavango Delta. Although there is still some debate with proponents of an East African origin for humans, there is no doubt that wetlands played a key role in both the earliest evolution and later migration and settlements of humans. Between 130,000 and 75,000 years ago, when Sahara was marked by numerous lakes, rivers, and associated marshes, these wetlands not only ameliorated human settlements, but also structured the network of contacts between different groups^v.
- ❖ Another keystone phase of human history is associated with the development of civilization in the swampy river valleys of the Middle East - on the Euphrates, Tigris and Nile. Mesopotamia can rightly be called the cradle of Western civilization. It was here that writing, literature, administration, centralized government, and large-scale water management were invented; from here agriculture spread throughout Europe. Important stories of Western civilization, including the story of Noah's flood, derive directly from Mesopotamia and were incorporated into the Torah and Old Testament after the exile of the Jews in Babylon. The gardens of Babylon, created amidst the Mesopotamian marshes, are believed to have provided the cultural template for the biblical Eden. Swamps played a key role in the development of Middle Eastern culture. Reeds and other wetland plants were used for construction, packing, weaving, and forage, as well as for making writing materials, weapons, and musical instruments. The Sumerian proverb "where there is no reed, there is the worst of all miseries" illustrates their economic importance. Mesopotamian creation myths emphasize that swamps were the first landscapes created and that humans were created only to take over the tasks of minor gods and dig canals in the reeds. In ancient Mesopotamia, wetlands were seen as beautiful, useful, and even erotically charged (after all, they were created from the semen of the god Enki – the creator of wetlands and humans!).
- ❖ The modern history of Mesopotamian wetlands reflects the tragic fate of wetlands and people associated with them in various parts of the world. As late as the mid-20th century, it was one of the largest wetlands in the Middle East, covering more than 20,000 km² and inhabited by descendants of the Sumerian civilization, the so-called Swamp Arabs of Madan. Since the 1950s, the process of draining these areas began, accelerated in the 1990s by Saddam Husajn to suppress the Shiite uprising in 1991. By 2003, the marshes of southern Iraq had shrunk by 90%, and the population of the Marsh Arabs - due to mass emigration and persecution - decreased from 500,000 to about 20,000 people. Today, numerous attempts are underway to restore the area's unique nature and improve people's living conditions. However, the possibilities of achieving these goals are limited by the previous large-scale hydro-engineering projects and the progressing climate change.



- ❖ In Africa and the Middle East, conflicts over water are becoming more and more pronounced, manifested, among other things, by stopping the flow of rivers with large dams. In the Sahel, the disruption of rivers due to dam construction is one of the important reasons for modern migrations from areas previously dependent on natural river hydrological rhythms.
- ❖ One of the still poorly described types of African wetlands is peatlands, which play an extremely important role in climate regulation. Only recent research, described in 2017 in the journal *Nature*^{vi}, has shown that the peatlands of the Congo Basin constitute the world's largest complex of tropical peatlands, covering 145,500 km² (an area comparable to almost half of Poland). The authors of the publication estimate that the peatland stores as much as 30 billion tons of carbon - the equivalent of 3 years of current global CO₂ emissions from burning fossil fuels. The study places the Democratic Republic of Congo and the Republic of Congo as the second and third most important tropical countries in the world in terms of peat resources, after Indonesia. The entire complex is covered by the world's largest transboundary Ramsar site. Research carried out in recent years has also made it possible to gather information on the peatlands of the Nile basin. Although much smaller than the swamps of the Congo Basin, their protection is extremely important for counteracting climate change, as hydrological changes in the region increasingly lead to the drying out of peatlands, shifting them from CO₂ sinks into significant sources of this gas to the atmosphere.

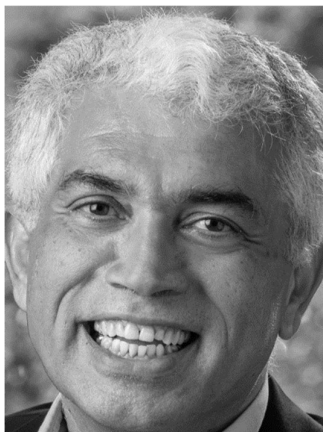


Hamdiya in her 50s, collects reeds from dawn to dusk in the southern Iraqi marshlands (Al Ahwar). Tamara Abdul Hadi.

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 5th 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 5th, 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'

(<https://www.kavehmadani.com/englishtalks>).



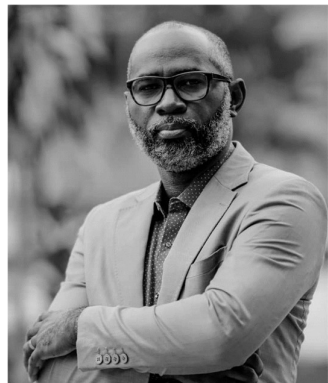


Dr. Samer Elshehawi (Egypt / Germany) - is an ecohydrologist and associate researcher at the Greifswald Mire Centre in Germany. Currently, he is the coordinator for the Nile Basin Peatland project and author of 'Groundwater isotopes and ecohydrological analysis of peatland landscapes' (PhD 2019; University of Groningen, the Netherlands) and 'Assessment of Carbon (CO₂) emissions avoidance potential from the Nile Basin peatlands', which will be the topic of his contribution at our WWD meeting.



is contributing to new and often disruptive migrations, including to Europe."

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 5th, 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



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 CO₂ 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 Paleocology 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

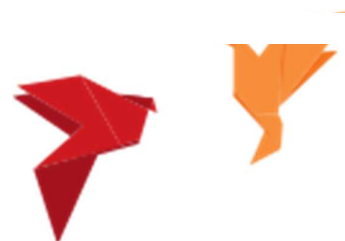
14.30-16.00 Wetlands of Africa

Samer Elskehawi (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](#) of [bagna.pl](#)

#WeAllComeFromThere.

Wetland Conservation Centre (PL Centrum Ochrony Mokradel, CMok) is a Polish society established in 2002. Our mission states: *Wetlands full of water and life - we save them from destruction and support others in caring for them.*

Contact:

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Magda Galus - Director: (+48) 737 333 736

Wiktor Kotowski – board member, associate professor at University of Warsaw: w.kotowski@bagna.pl

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



ⁱ <https://www.nationalgeographic.org/media/global-human-journey/>

ⁱⁱ <https://undocs.org/en/A/75/L.125>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.worldwetlandsday.org/events>

^{iv} Chan, Eva KF, et al. "Human origins in a southern African palaeo-wetland and first migrations." *Nature* 575.7781 (2019): 185-189. <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41586-019-1714-1>

^v Scerri, E. M., Drake, N. A., Jennings, R., & Groucutt, H. S. (2014). Earliest evidence for the structure of *Homo sapiens* populations in Africa. *Quaternary Science Reviews*, 101, 207-216.

<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0277379114003023>

^{vi} Dargie, Greta C., et al. "Age, extent and carbon storage of the central Congo Basin peatland complex." *Nature* 542.7639 (2017): 86-90. <https://www.nature.com/articles/nature21048>

