

I spent the month of January 2008 in and around Suleimaniya, in Kurdish Iraq, working for the Iraqi conservation group *Nature Iraq*. While I was there I wrote the following impressions of the people and the land.

Suleimaniya – First Impressions

January 10, 2008

by Dana Visalli

I arrived in Suleimaniya on January 3, after a two-hour flight from Amman, Jordan. My purpose in being here is to engage in a personal way with what we euphemistically call 'US foreign policy'; in this case I am interested in opportunities to meet with Kurds who live here and the Iraqi-Arab refugees that have sought shelter here from the violence to the south. At the same time I am volunteering for an organization called *Nature Iraq*, which formed in recent years with the admirable goal of restoring the southern marshlands at the confluence of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. These were among the most ecologically important wetlands in the world until 90% of their area was drained by Saddam Hussein in the 1990s (using engineering plans drawn up by British hydrologists). *NatureIraq* now has programs in Kurdistan as well; I will write about this at some point; information is available at www.natureiraq.org and www.edenagain.org



My first impressions of Kurdistan revolve around the venerable subjects of energy and ecology. I have had the opportunity to spend 3 days out in the countryside, joining an IBA (Important Bird Area, a classification developed by Bird-life International) survey team at two large reservoirs near Suleimaniya (Dukan and Darbendikan).

The landscape in Kurdistan is austere in the extreme, due in part to the general aridity of the area, and in part to the impact of 10,000 years of human civilization. The land is nearly devoid of vegetation. Granted it is winter here, but there is often no sign that anything green grew on the hills in summer. Like McPhee's Basin and Range, the lack of vegetation creates a certain stark beauty, because the jagged edges of the ancient sedimentary rock are laid bare to see, dipping, striking and twisting, often turned upend at 90 degrees, rising several thousand feet above the plain to form jagged mountain ridges.

Exactly what it is that the pervasive goats, sheep and cows are surviving on is something of a mystery, but the wrinkled, horizontal aging lines across of the "bovigenic" landscape are a testament to their presence here for thousands of years. How do the people survive? I don't know the answer to that; my guess is that the growing population is supported by the global petroleum culture. The primary foods are meat-kabobs and white-flour flat bread. I have seen only one or two postage-stamp sized gardens. I have walked across several agricultural fields which would one would have thought were a rocky wastelands, except that the heavy clay soil had parallel furrows in it, disked by a tractor in preparation for planting wheat in the spring. The soil dries rock-hard, due to the absence of humus, although plastic bags blowing across the landscape take root in the fields and impart a certain friability to the dirt. I'm sure people would be shocked at the idea of rejoining the cycle of life by returning the flow of nutrients coming from their bodies back into the soil.

The weather has been what I could call "continental"---cold and windy. In fact the temperature dropped to 22 degrees the night before last and the wind howled until morning; in my pleasant, concrete bedroom the curtains danced to the marauding wind, and the generator-driven electric heater worked overtime to keep the room above 40 degrees. In the morning the water pipes were frozen at both of the *NatureIraq* buildings, and the diesel had jelled in the generators. In an impressive turn of events, the antifreeze had also frozen in the radiators. How could this be possible at 22 degrees? Because this is the 3rd World, and the antifreeze had been spiked with water before it was sold.

Frozen antifreeze and jelled diesel were the problems of the well-to-do yesterday morning; one can only imagine how the thousands of Iraqi refugees living in tents at the edge of town fared; they certainly didn't have any diesel to worry about (I hope to visit this camp while here). Out on the streets, fuel is sold in 5-gallon jugs, and old tires are regularly set alight at the edge of the road as a sort of cheery but smoky campfire.

Surely one of the most astonishing elements of human existence is how far we have traveled from ecologically intelligent, reality-based cultures. Here in Kurdistan, as in much of the world, the human population booms while the very foundation of life--the soil, water and energy bases--shrink. The people eat refined food laced with white sugar and fat. How is it possible to be literally made of the earth, made over millions of years of wind, sand and stars, and yet to be so alienated from the roots of our existence?

The curious counterpoint is the almost-predictable countenance of both the Kurds and the Arabs; they are just the sweetest, friendliest, most animated people imaginable. I have been in the presence of five Americans since my arrival here, and really none of them have the simple, child-like spontaneous pleasure-in-living that one experiences with these local people, beset with troubles though they be. This is not a judgment, just an observation.

Mission Accomplished

by Dana Visalli

Many people have fled from the violence that has ravaged south and central Iraq since the United States took control of these areas in 2003. At least two million Iraqis are refugees in Jordan and Syria, and another two million are "internally displaced people," refugees inside the country. Most of these people have not only left their homes, they have also lost their homes, because a process of ethnic cleansing has rearranged Sunni and Shia families as if they were pieces on a chess board. Shias now live in homes recently occupied by Sunni, and visa versa.



Mere numbers can never communicate the reality of a situation—four million Iraqi refugees since the invasion, one million Iraqis estimated killed, two million wounded. One can only imagine the impact on individual lives, the amount of suffering, contained within those numbers.

On Friday I visited the Quala refugee camp in Suleimaniya. The camp began as three families from Baghdad squatting out on the edge of town, but now contains over 600 people living in tents supplied by the UNHCR—the United Nations High Commission on Refugees. The camp is located in a broad, open expanse of concrete building rubble, with a few plastic water tanks scattered about where the inhabitants can come to fill jugs. There is apparent no garbage pickup, as there are ample quantities of plastic and other debris strewn throughout the camp.

My translator and I picked our way through the rubble to a teahouse-tent, where we were able to meet with the mayor of the camp, Walid. With hookas lining one wall, we were clearly in a public space, but for most of the duration of our conversation there were just the three of us, sitting cross-legged on the floor around a kerosene heater.

Walid was happy when the Americans attacked his country in 2003. He said he would like to thank Bush personally for sending American troops. Some years before the invasion, when he was required to report for military duty,

he was three days late getting to the army recruitment center. His sister, who was pregnant, was having an operation, and he felt that he needed to remain at home to help her. He was tried by Saddam Hussein's government for desertion and sentenced to death, later reduced to 15 years in prison. He was in Abu Ghraib for 6 years, and was only released when Saddam emptied the prison just before the U.S. offensive began. Walid was tortured during his incarceration, and pointed out missing front teeth and an angry scar on his head to prove the point.



Sectarian violence increased in Iraq in 2004 and 2005. Walid's sister and brother were slaughtered in Baghdad – that is the word the translator used. Walid wept silently as he conveyed this. He is Sunni, married to a Shia woman. The Mehdi Army caught him in early 2006 and was going to kill him – because he was a Sunni – but his wife begged for his life. The Mehdi did let him go, but only on the condition that he divorce his wife and leave Baghdad. It was then that Walid and his wife departed, together, for Suliemaniya.

Life in the camp is difficult. Men go to town looking for work, but there is none; women go to town to beg for food and money. The children are filthy. It is cold in camp – temperatures in Sulemaniya in January are 20-30 degrees at night, with strong winds. One can only imagine what it is like in summer, when temperatures outside reach 120 degrees. The only electricity available in camp comes from small generators, and heat from kerosene burners, with the gasoline and kerosene increasingly expensive. Food is distributed once a month by UNICEF.

I asked Walid if he would still like to thank Bush, after all he has been through since the war started. He answered, with tears in his eyes, "Yes, but why can't he order peace? If he can order war why can't he order peace? Tell Bush I cry over the situation in Iraq."

The Wine-colored, Blood-stained, Red Badge of Courage

by Dana Visalli

Life here in Iraq is not so different than it is at home in the United States, except that the electricity keeps going off while am slicing vegetables for dinner, which means I am then wielding a sharp knife in the pitch dark. Not only am I brandishing a sharp knife in the darkness, but the poorly made knife handle keeps falling off from the blade just about the time the lights go out, making dinner preparation a trying task indeed.

This is not an insurmountable problem, because about thirty seconds after the city electricity goes off the big diesel generator out on the street roars to life – in fact all the big diesel generators on the block roar to life, as there is one for every house in this well-to-do district of Suleimaniya. From the kitchen window I notice that the rest of the city stays dark much longer than does our block. One can only imagine how the millions of Iraqi IDPs – Internally Displaced Persons – from the on-going war are faring in their wind-battered tent camps without power.



The U.S. loves aerial tankers, so much so that it plans to purchase 100 billion dollars worth of new ones in the next 10 years, while people and the environment go to hell.

The electricity failing is less of a problem than the fact that the water pipes in the house have frozen repeatedly. The issue here in this community house is that the toilets won't flush when the water doesn't flow, so the human effluenza quickly begins to back up in the toilet bowl. Fortunately I am working with a group of environmentalists, and we understand the importance of sustainable flushing. We resolved this conundrum by simply purchasing bottled water by the case, and use the handy pint-sized bottles of spring water to fill the toilet tank and flush the bowl, thereby maintaining the ecological equilibrium of the house. The war refugees in their camps don't have flush toilets, so they are not troubled by this breakdown in modern domestic infrastructure.

I confess, when the toilets failed, my own personal ecological orientation drove me out into the backyard in the freezing winds of the early morning's light, where I furtively jabbed a hole in the clay soil with butter knife in order to contribute a token amount of fertilizer to the humus-starved soil of the Cradle of Civilization. Contravening social mores by briefly rejoining the Great Cycle of Being was a frightening experience though, and I resolved to henceforth adhere to the Law of the Pack and shit in the toilet, which I had in any case been compelled to swear to back when I was a Cub Scout.

Flushing the toilets is, in the larger picture, less of a problem than doing the laundry, because the washing machine requires water *and* electricity at the same time, which is a rare conjunction of resources. Being a neophyte here I was unprepared for the potential pitfalls of employing the washer. Immediately after throwing all my clothes in and starting the cycle the electricity failed, and then that night the pipes froze. My dampened clothes sat in the washer for four days, while several species of mold attempted to digest any nutrients present on them before blind luck aligned water and power again. The multitudes of refugees from the war (estimated to total 4.5 million inside and outside Iraq, one of the great human migrations to nowhere in all of human history) are spared this misery as they have no running water nor machines to freeze.

It came as a shock to discover that it gets very cold in northern Iraq in the winter, so cold that even antifreeze congeals into ice, especially in the radiators of the generators. In apparent defiance of the laws of physics, this can occur at temperatures just below 32 degrees Fahrenheit, much warmer than it occurs in North America. The explanation for this anomaly appears to be that Iraqi merchants have realized that the shortage of antifreeze in the country could be quickly and simply resolved by adding water to this chemical concoction, vastly increasing the quantity of antifreeze available to the general public. This concernth not the masses of refugees from America's war in Iraq, for they have neither radiators nor antifreeze to worry about.

All of these issues pale, however, when one considers the hazards of simply finding something to drink in Iraq. After ten days without even a drop of wine, I had decided to seek out one of the few Christian-run liquor stores in this non-alcoholic Muslim city. An Iraqi friend drove me to one such store, but as I got out of the car he admonished me to "make it quick" because "someone was shot to death just yesterday" for buying liquor in Suleimaniya. I did a rapid assessment of my mental resolve, and then in an uncharacteristically courageous act dashed into the store to make the purchase.

The United States government demonstrated its courage and resolve on the very same day, when it dropped 40,000 pounds of bombs in just 10 minutes – that would be about \$10 million dollars worth of explosives dropped by a billion dollars worth of aircraft – on an impoverished farming village just south of Baghdad. We don't know how many were killed because "the United States does not do body counts," but we can rest assured that this courageous act will liberate another group of Iraqis from the drudgery of home life and swell the tide of refugees flowing outward into the larger world.

Diyala Man

by Dana Visalli

A very interesting interaction for me occurred just today (Jan 22th). Our field survey crew had drive for 2 hours to the south of Suleimaniya, to a spot on the Diyala River, to gather various sorts of data. I wandered off with the bird guy, Korsh, but after about half an hour we got separated, and there I was along, standing on the banks of the Diyala River by myself. There were some plover-type birds across the river, and I had 'Birds of the Middle East' with me, so I knelt down to try to sort them out.

It wasn't long before I heard a clearing-the-throat kind of sound, and turned to see an elder Kurdish gent emerging from the brush. Waving seems to make everything OK around here; I waved, and he smiled and walked over to

me. So there we were, I not knowing a word of Kurdish and he not a word of English. I showed him the bird book, and the binoculars, and pointed to the birds, and he smiled broadly and said something, I of course don't have a clue what. Kurds love Americans---there are several ironies here, one is that 30 miles further south in Arab Diyala Province the insurgency is still raging--and I realized I could try to tell him in Arabic that I was an American. I said, 'Ana Amerikaniya.' His smiled broadened, and then laughed and laughed. Ah, it's good to be an American.



Later, when I rejoined Korsh and told him the story, he said 'No, no, Amerikee; Amerikaniya means you are an American woman.' No wonder the old man got a belly laugh out of the exchange.

But, there is still the great charm of two people from opposite sides of the planet, genetically separated for 10,000 years, having a warm and entertaining exchange at the edge of a beautiful river.

Kurdistan: Land of No Opportunity

by Dana Visalli

I had become aware that there was some kind of on-going protest going on at a public park in town. I was able to go to this site today, with an interpreter. There is a big army-style tent set up in there, where a group of young people have been vigiling for 140 days now.

What about? About the fact that there is little or no opportunity for young people to create meaningful lives for themselves in Kurdistan. By 'meaningful' they are not asking for so much; basically just a decent education and some way to make a living as adults. They have 14 talking points that they are requesting the regional government to acknowledge; I got four of them written down:

1. Creating some kind of job potential for young people; building factories was mentioned, so they were only asking for the potential of even a factory job.
2. Decent medical care for young people, including sending critically ill people out of the country when necessary for advanced care, instead of letting them die.
3. Lowering the age limit for political candidates from 30 to 23.



4. Giving new families a grant of money so that they have a chance to acquire a roof over their heads.

The other side of the issue is the high level of nepotism and corruption in the Kurdish government. The best extreme example of this is the widespread suspicion that Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani has between \$2-14 billion stashed in European banks. I have run into several of Vice-president Jalul Talabani's very large country estates in my travels outside Suleimaniya.

This group has been harassed by the KRG – Kurdistan Regional Government, and even threatened with violence and death. Their comment was, "We will not give up."

An interesting twist came when they asked me, "What advice do you have for us?"

I might challenge you in the same way, what might there be to say under such circumstances?

At first I could think of nothing. As the conversation continued, several things came to mind. Here's what I came up with – for better and for worse – this is just the ongoing challenge of how to respond to the world we find ourselves in.

I asked them if they had read any Gandhi. I thought of him because of 1) his ability to honor even his adversaries, and 2) his interest in creating simple and independent lifestyles that would not concentrate power in the hands and heads of a few people.

Along these same lines, I pointed out that factory jobs would mean they would still be dependent on the government; is there any way they could create a livelihood on their own? Not to be presumptuous here; these are poor people. But Gandhi was spinning wool and making his own clothes.

I also said that I didn't think there would be any way for people to regain their freedom without incorporating ecology into the movement. I didn't expect them to know what I meant, and indeed they asked what I meant by 'ecology.' But I am so impressed by how degraded the land is here, with the oak forests that once covered vast swathes now all gone. We talked about this a bit, and a useful avenue opened up when my interpreter Ihsen and I told them about the 'Green Kurdistan' movement – people planting trees throughout the region. They will be able to get in touch with the leaders of this movement in Suliemaniya.

That's what I could think of. What seems most interesting here is the challenge; how can we think about our world and how can we respond to it in ways that are meaningful to us?

I was also very cognizant, while sitting with them, of the news I saw yesterday that the US Congress has approved a \$696 billion war budget for next year – a figure that does not include the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan – and that the Iraq war is now expected to cost at least \$2 trillion. How many meaningful jobs could those resources have supplied in the world, how many trees to plant, how many solar panels, how many simple homes for people?

*Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high;
Where knowledge is free;
Where the world has not been broken up into fragments by narrow domestic walls;
Where the clear stream of reason has not lost its way into the dreary desert sand of dead habit;
Into that heaven of freedom, my Father, let my country awake."*

Rabindranath Tagore