

# LEGACIES OF LOSS

## SOCIOCULTURAL CONSEQUENCES OF IRAQI MARSH DESTRUCTION

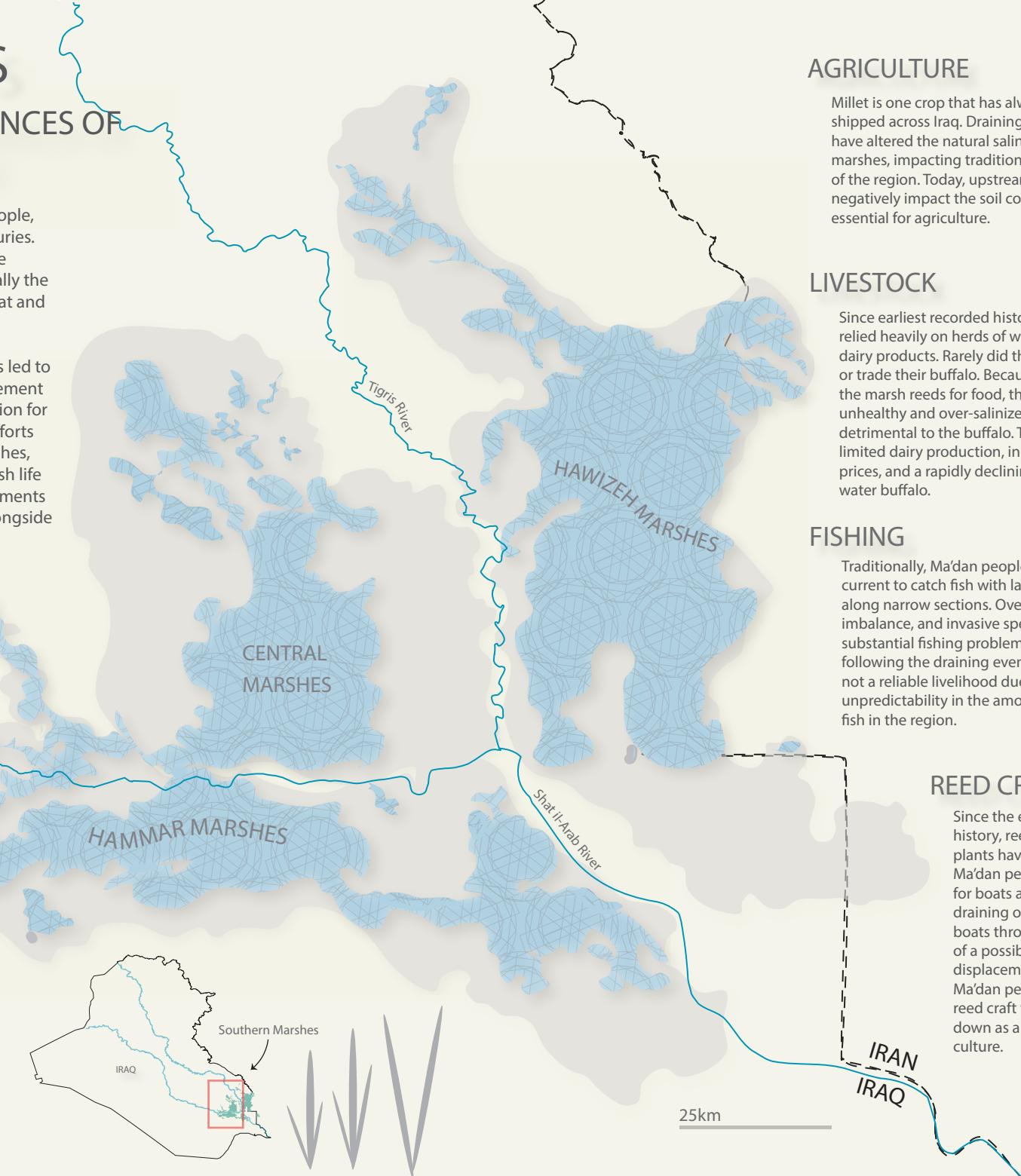
Indigenous Marshland Arabs, known as the Ma'dan People, have inhabited the wetlands of Southern Iraq for centuries. Marsh communities center their livelihoods around the abundant resources provided by the wetlands, especially the strong, reed grasses that are utilized as material for boat and house building, traditional craft, and reed mats.

The destruction of the marshes beginning in the 1990s led to the loss of over half of the initial wetland area, displacement of the Ma'dan People, and extreme livelihood destruction for individuals who remained. Despite international aid efforts that helped to re-flood portions of the destroyed marshes, many of the traditional socio-cultural elements of marsh life have not been restored. Below are just a few of the elements of traditional Ma'dan livelihood that have been lost alongside natural landscapes and ecological losses.

--- Marsh extent prior to draining (1970)  
- - - Current marsh extent (2020)

### MARSH TRANSPORTATION

This circular pattern, used to represent the remaining wetlands, is derived from a base shape design for a traditional Guffa boat. Iraqi artists Maryam Saeed and Rashad Salim have studied and produced reconstructions of cultural boats such as this one. The Guffa boat is traditionally used to transport people and cargo through the marshes and along river systems.



### AGRICULTURE

Millet is one crop that has always been farmed and shipped across Iraq. Draining and re-flooding efforts have altered the natural salinity levels of the marshes, impacting traditional agriculture practices of the region. Today, upstream dams continue to negatively impact the soil composition that is essential for agriculture.

### LIVESTOCK

Since earliest recorded history, the Ma'dan have relied heavily on herds of water buffalo for their dairy products. Rarely did the Ma'dan people kill or trade their buffalo. Because buffalo consume the marsh reeds for food, the present day unhealthy and over-salinated reeds can be detrimental to the buffalo. This impact results in limited dairy production, increased livestock prices, and a rapidly declining population of water buffalo.

### FISHING

Traditionally, Ma'dan people utilized the river current to catch fish with large nets placed along narrow sections. Overfishing, salinity imbalance, and invasive species have led to substantial fishing problems in the marshes following the draining events. Today, fishing is not a reliable livelihood due to extreme unpredictability in the amount and types of fish in the region.

### REED CRAFTS

Since the earliest recorded history, reeds and other wetland plants have been used by the Ma'dan people as building tools for boats and houses. With the draining of the marshes, travel on boats through waterways is less of a possibility. Additionally, the displacement of thousands of Ma'dan people has led to fewer reed craft traditions being passed down as a part of regional culture.