

FOREWORD

Because of their capacity to provide regular water supply, fertile soils and numerous natural resources, freshwater and coastal wetlands in the Middle East have from time immemorial been regarded as having played an essential role in the development of many of the most ancient societies in the world. For this reason one can reasonably assume that wetland resources in this region have been used sustainably until modern times, but unfortunately things have now changed. Lying below the 200-mm isohyet most wetlands in the Middle East lie within one of the most arid zones in the world. Demands from increased agricultural, urban and industrial activities, in addition to climatological constraints, are now putting all types of wetlands and subterranean water resources under serious pressure. In order to respond to the needs of rapidly expanding populations, traditional systems of irrigation have been replaced progressively by major irrigation schemes alongside large-scale water management systems, and many large dams have been constructed to supply both water and electricity to growing urban centres, thereby putting limited river sources under further stress. Likewise, the fishing industry, one of the most dynamic industries in the world with its sporadic pollution, is threatening the functioning and integrity of many coastal ecosystems which also harbour extremely productive estuaries, mudflats, lagoons and mangroves. In view of this assessment and as the need to implement strategies for sustainable living has now been widely recognised, so has the necessity to undertake a thorough review of the region's wetland resources become more acute.

By compiling this very first *Directory of Wetlands in the Middle East*, IUCN - the World Conservation Union, the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), the International Waterfowl and Wetlands Research Bureau (IWRB), BirdLife International and the Ramsar Convention Bureau, with technical support from many national institutions and partners, aim at increasing the awareness among decision makers and planners of the consequences of wetland loss and degradation. It aims also to impress on them the need for renewed efforts to achieve a more sustainable use of wetland resources. Since the information included in the Directory will need to be updated regularly, perhaps through the compilation of more detailed national inventories as was often the case in other regions, it is hoped that this volume represents an important step towards the creation of an improved monitoring programme of the status of wetlands in the Middle East. In addition, all those who have contributed to the Directory hope that it will be used at national and regional level to identify the most important parameters responsible for wetland loss and thereafter for the design and implementation of national wetland conservation programmes to ensure that wetland resources remain available forever.

Last, but not least, the *Directory of Wetlands in the Middle East* will help responsible authorities to identify new sites for listing under the Ramsar Convention of Wetlands of International Importance especially as Waterfowl Habitat. The Ramsar Convention, which now has 88 Contracting Parties, promotes the "wise use" of wetlands worldwide through a programme based on the development of national wetlands policies, changes in

sometimes outdated legislation and increased efforts for institutional strengthening; in addition the Ramsar Convention promotes international cooperation for wetland conservation with a view to achieving better coordination in the management of shared hydrological units. Since all the partners involved in the production of the Directory are confident that this work will contribute to ensure a wiser use of wetlands in the Middle East, there is no doubt that it will also strengthen the effectiveness of the Ramsar Convention in this region.

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