

**WHAT DOES IT MEAN  
TO SAVE A MARSH?**

CHRIS NAYLOR

Photography by Martin Bernhard



Arriving in post-civil war Lebanon in 1995, my wife Susanna and I tried to live by the idea crystallised in the Lausanne slogan: “the whole church taking the whole gospel to the whole world.” When we arrived, “we” were a young missionary couple with two small kids. Our part of the “whole church” was a secondment brokered by mission agency Interserve between our home church (in the small English city of Lincoln) and the Presbyterian Church of Syria and Lebanon. Our part of the “whole world” was the beautiful Bekaa valley, an uplifted plain defined by the soaring grandeur of the Lebanon and anti-Lebanon mountain chains. Our part of the “whole gospel” was quite diverse.

It started traditionally enough with a teaching / chaplaincy role in the large church school serving the Northern Bekaa. Providing schooling to Shiite, Sunni and Christian communities, the school was a force for community integration as well as education, and gave opportunities for gospel conversations with the youth of the valley. Our life was not restricted to the confines of the school, so neither was our ministry. We became part of the community, learning to value what the community valued and mourn when the community mourned. We did better in some areas than others. It was easy to value the hospitality, the imperative for welcome, the fantastic food and the *Eid* celebrations, harder to understand the fascination with guns and often violent TV shows. We mourned and took refuge with the community when violence moved from the TV screens to our own skies and streets – during several inter-communal and international conflicts. In people’s homes and when sharing meals we discussed local attitudes from cultural and biblical perspectives (often finding them to be remarkably similar). We learnt much and also brought new perspectives – mostly, we hoped, from Scripture rather than from the UK.

One community concern that loomed large in our early days in the Bekaa was the state of the environment. Our friends and neighbours were proud of the local beauty but grieved by the garbage that clogged the streets, the pollution that was killing the rivers and the millions of trees that had been lost on the hillsides through the years of military occupation and fighting. A focus for this community concern was the Aammiq Wetland, or

what remained of it, just down the road. Although the conservation establishment in Beirut was actively setting up protected areas across the country, the received wisdom was that our local marsh had been irrevocably damaged through the years of civil war and was no longer a hotspot for plants and animals. Being a keen birder, I decided to put this assumption to the test. Excitedly, I discovered that the miracle of migration regularly renewed the tired but still functioning ecosystem with a wildlife spectacle of international importance. Thousands of white storks, and hundreds of eagles, buzzards, kites, harriers and pelicans brought the marshes back to life, but only for a season. For most of the year, fire and overgrazing ravaged the reed beds, excessive irrigation drained the water table and extravagant hunting killed nearly everything wild that moved.

The words of Hosea 4 from centuries earlier, but only a few miles away echoed: “... the land mourns, and all who dwell in it waste away, the beasts of the

field and the birds of the air and the fish of the sea are dying.” The bloodshed of the long Lebanese civil war had seemingly claimed another victim.

But what was our response? Did the “whole gospel” have something to say about this part of the “whole world?” A Rocha heard about some of the

early work we and others were doing and helped us answer that question with an emphatic “Yes!” Soon we were launched on a project to do no less than save the marsh. It took a decade, but the marsh has been saved. Along the way we learnt much about ecological restoration. We also learnt a fair bit about mission.

Firstly, just as Hosea points out, the presenting problems – the dying and dead birds, rivers and land are the symptoms, not the cause. Moral failure – sin – is the cause of the problems in the environment, just as it is in all other areas of life. To protect the birds and restore the reed beds we had to address the root causes and that meant working with local farmers, land owners, village council members and many others to undo the sins of the past. Literally, that meant dealing with the likes of corruption, greed and over-exploitation. This all led to some marvellous conversations about the need for repentance and the “good news” of restoration in the most unlikely places and, fabulously, evidence

**GETTING YOUR SLEEVES ROLLED UP TOGETHER TO PROTECT A BEAUTIFUL BUT FRAGILE PART OF THE EARTH CAN RESTORE MORE THAN HABITATS. WE OFTEN EXPERIENCED PROFOUND SHARING OF DEEPLY HUMAN RESPONSES TO THE WONDERS OF CREATION WITH FRIENDS OF OTHER FAITHS AND NO FAITH**



Aammiq Marsh, Bekaa Valley, with the Chouf Mountains (Mount Lebanon Range) in the background



Richard Storey, former Interserve missionary seconded to A Rocha Lebanon, 2002–2004, now Chair of A Rocha Aotearoa New Zealand, collecting samples of aquatic insects from Aammiq Marsh



Chris Naylor (third from left, behind tripod) training local wildlife managers in bird identification.

of renewal and transformation in the landscape that surrounded us.

We also discovered that mission is a community affair. We had few (if any) of the skills needed to restore a wetland. But, over the years, the Lord provided other volunteers and team members (local and international). These were people who understood the hydrology of wetlands, could identify the key invertebrates, teach school children, take great photos, paint the classroom, translate, sew, cook, clean, drive. Together we made a difference. We also discovered that the community doesn't always look the way you expect. Sometimes help came from the most unlikely sources. Creation care is a remarkably inclusive activity. Many people love the planet – even though they don't know its Maker. Getting your sleeves rolled up together to protect a beautiful but fragile part of the Earth can restore more than habitats. We often experienced profound sharing of deeply human responses to the wonders of creation with friends of other faiths and no faith. Sometimes these experiences led to deep personal change that was clear to see; sometimes it didn't, but that's their story.

Our story was one of great change – obvious in the wetland, within the community, but equally dramatic in ourselves. In the early days we fretted over the question – which bit of *what we do* is mission and what just supports us to *do* the mission? Yet, our problem wasn't one of time sheets and priorities, it was of too small a view of mission. And that was because we had too small a view of the gospel. Our mission, as a people of faith, is to live and work to the glory of God – giving *all* that we do and *all* that we are in worship to him. In doing that, we bring “the whole gospel to the whole world.”

**CHRIS NAYLOR** joined A Rocha in 1997 and co-founded the work of A Rocha in Lebanon, where he was Director until 2009. In that role he supervised the habitat restoration programme at the Aammiq Marsh, the development of an environmental education project and a field research programme – identifying 11 new important bird areas nationally. He is now Executive Director of A Rocha International. He is married with three children and resides in Oxford, UK.