

“ABBANDAN-DARI” - A CUSTOMARY MANAGEMENT SYSTEM FOR THE CONSERVATION OF THE ANZALI WETLAND RAMSAR SITE, IRAN



The history of conservation by indigenous peoples and local/traditional communities goes back thousands of years. It frequently features strong social organisation, identity, collective production, and adaptation of governance and management systems to complex ecological conditions.

The Anzali Wetland (measuring approximately 193 km²) is a Ramsar Site on the southern coast of the Caspian Sea in Iran, and is internationally known as a habitat for migratory birds. The wetland has been degraded, and is in need of immediate restoration. This is important to all relevant right-holders and stakeholders.

One of the elements that plays a vital role in the conservation, sustainable use and restoration of the Anzali Wetland is the system of customary management practiced among the communities surrounding the wetland, known as “Abbandan-dari”. An “abbandan” is a type of shallow man-made reservoir found in the southern Caspian lowlands and used both for aquaculture and to supply water for rice farming. A specific form of abbandan occurs within the Anzali wetland, where they range in size from 10 to 100 hectares and play a key role in supporting biodiversity and the restoration of the ecosystem. The customary abbandan-dari system is practised by a group of local people referred to as “abbandan-dar”.

For hundreds of years, Abbandan-dari has been one of the recorded professions in the communities around Anzali. It is concerned with ensuring optimum management of water and biological resources, acting as a source of protein for local families and maintaining the traditional food heritage of northern Iran. Despite many socio-economic changes and developments over the centuries, this system still survives today, and as well as maintaining a traditional way of life, it offers a basis for community based tourism.

The livelihoods of local people are dependent on these ecosystems in terms of their socio-cultural, spiritual and religious values. This is reflected in the way in which Abbandan-dari operates in harmony with the natural world.

In the past, monitoring of the customary fishing and hunting practices within the Abbandans was the responsibility of community elders. Each customary Abbandan area was operated as an Indigenous Community Conserved Area (ICCA). Since 1971, however, abbandan-dari practices have been undertaken in a new way, under the supervision of the Department of Environment (DoE). Areas are rented to groups of local users for a period of six months (6 September - 6 March, covering the fishing and hunting seasons), and conservation conditions are built in to the rental agreements.



The abbandan-dari system, in common with some other traditional systems elsewhere in the world, is capable of being the basis of a management institution which utilises both indigenous knowledge and the latest scientific methods.

Formal recognition as an Indigenous and Community Conserved Area (ICCA) will assist with this, involving local stakeholders in natural resource management, decision making and implementation processes within the Anzali Wetland. This customary management system provides secure livelihoods and enables the conservation of sensitive habitats, species and the bio-cultural diversity of the wetland, supporting social cohesion and the prospects for sustainable development.

Border of an Ab-bandan within the Anzali wetland (Photo: M. Hasannezhad, Cenesta)



By Nahid Naghizadeh (Senior Expert, Social Facilitator, CENESTA)

Since 1994, I have worked with CENESTA and have over 15 years of experience with indigenous peoples (IPs) and local communities (LCs) of Iran in the field of endogenous development, participatory planning and action, re-empowering of IPs and LCs to advocate their rights over their territories, combating desertification and facilitating the self-organization of IPs and LCs.

Nahid Naghizadeh (Senior Expert, Social Facilitator, CENESTA)