‘The Islamic Republic of Iran’, to give the country its proper title, has a population of 73 million people but is, economically, still recovering from the Iran-Iraq war, and the US government’s present trade embargo which began in 1995. Culturally, Iran is a strongly Muslim country, although I discovered many people are not actually practicing Muslims. For visitors like me, this means the people are very welcoming and hospitable wherever you go. In the week I spent living with the reserve rangers, in their basic accommodation on site, I was always impressed at the friendliness of the staff even though they couldn’t communicate in English and I couldn’t speak any Persian.

An offer to work in Iran was too tempting to turn down. What would it be like? What are Iranian schools like? How much out of school learning goes on? Does anyone care about the environment? Do they hate Westerners?

Iran is a vast country, larger then Spain, spreading between Turkey and Iraq. It is diverse, ethnically, socially and ecologically. There are mountains rising to over 5600m (good for walking, climbing and skiing), deserts covering more than 370,000km² and the country boasts two navies, based on the Caspian Sea and Persian Gulf.

Anzali Wetland Conservation Project

Anzali Wetland is a beautiful wetland located on the southern coast of the Caspian Sea. The wetland is over 100km² in size, the biggest Leighton Moss or Minsemere you have ever seen. Anzali is used as a wintering ground by thousands of migratory wildfowl from all over the world, including Siberian Crane and Whooper Swans. It is a site of international importance under the Ramsar Convention. The area is a famous one for tourists in Iran, mainly for the water lilies that flower in September.
Unfortunately the water quality of the wetland is deteriorating due to the inflow of wastewater and solid waste from neighbouring cities and pollution from farming. Anzali port at the mouth of the wetland is home to Iran’s biggest port. Also from the inflow of sediment from the mountain areas as a result of deforestation and over grazing is also a major concern.

To address some of these issues the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) carried out a study, which suggested 6 pilot activities to improve the environmental conditions of the area. One of which was ‘participation in environmental education’ and Field Studies Council (FSC) was invited to develop the environmental education strategy for the area.

The programme included the building of the first wetland education centre in Iran. This has been equipped with binoculars and field guides and is also intended to be used as a base for eco-tourism developments. The project has also funded the building of a 6.4m high bird watching tower, a 1km long wetland bird walk and a hide to observe birds from.

My role was as part of the capacity building programme for local project staff and schoolteachers who rarely teach in the outdoor classroom. Although trips out from school are frequent, normally they are to theatres, museums or sports events; taking a group of students into the outdoor environment, never mind a nature reserve, is quite novel.

Over the course of two weeks I designed three learning sessions for the wetland centre and trained the local staff in the delivery of the sessions. This ‘capacity building’ is important in these projects as foreign ‘experts’ are not going to be around for ever and local people need to have ownership on their project and wetland site.

To round off my stay and test the new education courses we organised three school visits (two boys’ and one girls’ groups, as the sexes are taught in separate schools). These were enjoyed greatly by everyone and gave the students an incite into how the actions of local people affected the wetland.

My main memories of Iran will be the people, their generosity and hospitality. I met a great many intelligent, articulate, positive educators and environmentalists. After its turbulent recent history most Iranians are looking forward to a time of change and development. There is a real feeling that the country will slowly become more ‘open’ in the next few years. If projects like this, which supports Education for Sustainable Development, can be part of that process all the better.

This was a local project, helping to save and enhance the wetland, which will have global consequences, for the water quality of the Caspian Sea and many thousands of migratory wildfowl.

About the author
Cory has worked on overseas projects helping to develop environmental projects in Uzbekistan, Philippines, Guyana, Poland and Slovakia. In the UK he is based in Cumbria and works as an educational and environmental advisor and project manager, outdoor educational instructor and tutor and as a writer of educational materials.

Photographs
All by the author.