



**Local NGOs in the Nineveh Plains are uniquely situated to deliver sustainable ecological and cultural conservation programs**, as they share the knowledge, expertise, and traditions of their local communities, yet this work is dominated by International Non-Governmental Organizations (INGOs). After the black flags of the Islamic State (IS) were lowered over Mosul in 2017, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) have served as crucial actors in Nineveh, filling gaps in service delivery and advocacy for marginalized groups. Six years after Nineveh's liberation, post-conflict reconstruction NGOs are focused on rebuilding the physical environment and re-establishing economic structures to facilitate the return of hundreds of thousands of displaced people. Yet, to restore these communities in the long term, NGOs must focus on revitalizing cultural identity and preserving the ability to practice distinctive customs, rituals, and traditions – including the use of wild plants – by the Nineveh Plains' different ethno-religious groups.

Wild plant collection, a deeply rooted practice in Nineveh Plains, plays a significant role in repairing social and inter-community relationships. After interviewing and collecting stories from 42 different villages among the ethno-religious communities of Nineveh's Yazidi, Christian, Shabak, Turkmen, and Kaka'i living in Al Hamdaniya, TelKaif and the sub-district of Bashiqa, the research team from University of Duhok and Indiana University identified threats to wild plants and their cultural uses and enumerated a range of activities needed to protect these plants and cultural practices. Successful implementation will tap into the unique strengths and capabilities of NGOs, using an inclusive and collaborative approach. **Yet, projects that protect wild plants and the associated cultural practices are not part of local NGOs' work.**

### Key Takeaways

- **Repair social and intercommunity relationships in the Nineveh Plains** by helping local cultures to sustainably collect wild plants.
- **Engage local Iraqi NGOs** in implementing **wild plant conservation projects** and supporting local culture.
- Incentivize INGOs to dedicate project resources to the **conservation of cultural heritage**.
- **Build capacity of local environmental NGOs** for sustainable wild plant conservation projects.

# Policies encouraging collaboration between Local NGOs, INGOs, and government can lead to *sustainable* conservation of wild plants and retention of local culture.

**Community Engagement:** Local NGOs collaborating with communities can actively engage in wild plant conservation, creating awareness of the significance of wild plants and advocating for their sustainable use through awareness campaigns, educational programs, and community-based initiatives.

**Conservation Initiatives:** Local NGOs can use their expertise to identify crucial areas and species that need urgent attention, which would drive on-the-ground wild plant conservation. The activities would include habitat restoration, seed collection, seed banking, community-managed protected areas, and sustainable harvesting.

**Traditional Knowledge and Cultural Preservation:** Local NGOs can play a significant role in preserving the traditional knowledge and cultural practices associated with wild plants. This is especially important as traditional knowledge systems and cultural practices are often threatened by modernization, globalization, and environmental changes.

**Policy Advocacy and Collaboration:** NGOs can advocate for policies supporting wild plant conservation. They can collaborate with local governments, regional authorities, and stakeholders to incorporate wild plant protection into land-use planning, development projects, and environmental policies.

Cultural practices essential to the restoration of community cohesion in the Nineveh Plains are being overlooked by NGOs. In Iraq, although NGOs possess substantial financial resources and extensive international knowledge, they are not effectively carrying out initiatives that promote cultural traditions linked to wild plants in the Nineveh Plains, or that conserve wild plants. Multiple interviews conducted by University of Duhok (UoD) and University of Notre Dame confirmed this.



The role that NGOs can play in the Conservation of Culturally Valuable Wild Plants in Nineveh Plains.

## **NGOs should proactively seek partnerships and collaborations with relevant local stakeholders,**

including government agencies, academic institutions, and communities. These alliances can pool resources, knowledge, and expertise, leading to more effective, high-impact conservation projects. Local authorities – including Directorates within the Ninawa local government such as Agriculture, Environment, Forestry, and Desertification Combat – should coordinate with NGOs to adhere to these recommendations:

**Prioritize long-term investment over emergency response.** NGOs should allocate resources towards long-term projects that focus on long-term sustainability, for example the restoration of communities' cultural practices. Preservation of culture involving wild plants deserves significant attention.

**Build capacity of local environmental NGOs** to sustain projects and reconstruction efforts. INGOs should go beyond financial support by transferring knowledge, expertise, and experience to empower local NGOs.

**Implement training courses for wild plant harvesters, herbalists, and shepherds** to increase their environmental awareness and promote sustainable use of wild plants.



**Utilize social media, workshops, seminars, and community outreach programs to educate** the public, government officials, and stakeholders about the value of preserving local plant diversity. Local NGOs play a crucial role in raising public awareness about the need for wild plant conservation.

**Engage ethnoreligious groups in conservation planning and implementation** through participatory approaches. Include them in decision-making processes and respect their traditional knowledge.

**Establish research and data sharing between governments and NGOs** to provide valuable information for evidence-based decision-making and policy advocacy.

**Project Name:** Support to Traditional Cultural Practices in Northern Iraq



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**Photos:** Wild Plants, Conducting the Wild Plant survey in Jarahiya Village. Credit: Research Team

