

CONFERENCE NOTE

Connecting Wetland Narratives to Action Plan: Stakeholders' Dialogue

Introduction

Wetlands stand hand in hand with other ecosystems like Forests and Coral Reefs. The similarity is not only in terms of productivity but also in terms of the rapid decline of these ecosystems. Wetlands today are possibly the most threatened ecosystem — being lost three times faster than forests. Internationally, with the publication of the sixth assessment report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) it has become even clearer that wetlands need to be an essential defence mechanism in adapting to climate change.

In the light of the existing destruction of blue carbon ecosystems (between 20 and 50 per cent), some analysts have researched and reached the conclusion that restoring wetlands can offer 14 percent of the mitigation potential needed to limit global warming to 2°C. Such findings, understood in the context of the UN Decade of Ecosystem Restoration, point to the urgency of wetland restoration in the interest of people, nature and climate. From 2021 onwards and up to 2030, a massive global restoration effort is underway for degraded ecosystems through innovative landscapes and seascapes management and wetland restoration is an important aspect of this management effort. This has useful implications for wetland management in local contexts.

West Bengal

In the context of West Bengal, wetlands of diverse types provide a range of ecosystem functions depending on their nature. Even the humble nameless local pond can provide multifarious services, ranging from being the local microclimate manager and biodiversity hotspot to becoming a crucial lifesaving resource during a neighbourhood fire. And, in the context of deltaic West Bengal, and as is recognized only too inadequately, the low-lying wetlands play a crucial role in flood control. Further, as wetland communities only know so well, wetlands provide crucial life-saving and life-giving economic benefits.

Sewage-fed fisheries

In this context, sewage fed wetland fish culture constitutes a wonderful example of wise use of wetlands by communities. West Bengal happens to provide home to the most famous international example of such a wetland complex—the East Kolkata Wetlands (EKW). It is no wonder that the latter made it to the Ramsar list of wetlands of international importance (in August 2002; the twentieth anniversary of

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the inclusion was on 19 August this year—a fact which has played its part in inspiring the present conference). It may be mentioned that West Bengal can take pride in being home to some other examples of sewage fed fish cultures operating outside the East Kolkata wetland complex and we look forward to sharing the conference with members of communities linked to those wetlands.

The Ramsar list and the Sundarban Wetlands

The Ramsar list, of course, owes its origin to the Ramsar Convention, which came into being in 1971 to recognise the vital importance of Wetlands and identify the most important ones across the planet. In addition to the EKW, recently, on 30 January 2019, the West Bengal portion of the Sundarban has found a long-deserved place on the Ramsar list. As regards the Sundarban, it may be noted that not the entire Biosphere Reserve but only the designated forested portions of the wetlands area have been classified as ‘Sundarban Wetlands, India’ in the aforesaid list.

The present conference, however, carefully avoids discussing the Sundarban, a unique and complex ecosystem on its own. The reason for that is simple. The Sundarban cluster has unique features and problems that necessitate separate and extended treatment. Trying to fit in a slot for the Sundarban in a two-day conference on wetlands would reduce the time urgently necessary for other wetland issues, without contributing meaningfully to the ever-continuing discussion on the Sundarban.

The law and wetlands: India and West Bengal

The legal Recognition and protection of wetlands in the context of India has started only recently and although there are legislations and policy in place, the implementation of such protection measures are still in the initial phase after almost a decade of such laws being enacted. Several legal interventions before the Supreme Court, High Court at Calcutta, and National Green Tribunal, many of which are ongoing, have resulted in numerous orders putting pressure on the state governments, including Government of West Bengal, to identify all wetlands within the state for the purpose of protecting them, as per the recently revised rules and guidelines made under the Environment Protection Act, 1986.

Immediate Concerns and Agendas for Wetland Protection

The twin targets before policy-makers and the community are conservation and management of wetlands in the light of the undeniable ecosystem and societal benefits that they bring, especially for the less privileged sections of society who are hit hardest by adverse change.

Despite a legal framework gradually being put in place and wetlands being documented for purposes of offering protection, the reality on the ground remains

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grim. Wetlands remain vulnerable due to lack of identification, documentation and understanding of their ecological character and management challenges. Peri-urban wetlands are threatened by urbanisation pressures. The rural scenario is more complicated. On the one hand, as settlements and agriculture has expanded, wetlands have disappeared. On the other hand, and particularly in coastal and near-coastal areas, one is witnessing increasing conversion of agricultural land, mangrove forest, etc. to wetlands and water bodies, created for the sole purpose of aquaculture, giving rise to another set of difficult problems. Political understanding of wetland vitality is sorely missing, with the ecosystem services provided by the wetlands being the most threatened. What is worst is an acute scarcity of finances jeopardising all wetland activity and this challenge needs to be faced head on.

The most important lacuna

But the most important gap is a lack of recognition of the role of the community as the practical custodians of the wetland ecosystems. They have no visibility. Further, the rights of wetland-dependent communities over waters and wetlands for livelihood purpose have received no legal recognition, let alone being considered as primary stakeholders in any and all management plans and authorities. Ironically, it has been overlooked that without their cooperation, wetlands will not be able to survive.

The role of women

Here, the role of women needs a special mention, as gender mainstreaming for decision-making in all wetland matters is of central importance. Women are intimately connected with wetland conservation, but this is rarely taken into account. In West Bengal, women play a crucial role in commercially exploiting wetland vegetation and make contributions to livelihood generation, which has been going on for a very long time. Yet, they are not given their due space in policy discussions. This needs to change.

Addressing the issue

The present conference intends to bring the wetland communities to the forefront. This will promote a stakeholder dialogue so that we better understand the challenges faced by these primary stakeholders while carrying out their livelihood activities, nurturing the wetlands in the process. Hearing their experiences holds the key to understanding the priorities for management purposes and what will protect the wetlands best. This will strengthen our future against climate uncertainties, and additionally improve ecosystem sustainability. It will provide space to women's participation, and also suggest ways for integrating their livelihood concerns with the overall wetland protection agenda. Uniquely, it will also allow individual conservers of wetlands to speak about their experiences and findings and allow us to learn from them.

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Wetlands in urban spaces

Last, but not perhaps the least, is a concern vital to urban and metropolitan spaces. Not only wetlands specifically under wise community-led wise use regimes, but wetlands in general are of crucial importance for those urban spaces. As perhaps hazily hinted earlier, urban spaces in West Bengal, as everywhere else in the world, are in dire need of microclimate management. With urban temperatures rising, in response to the usual pan-planetary global warming processes and also the explosive expansion of concretised spaces, the need for green areas, indispensably including wetlands, have emerged as a crying need. In addition, wetlands provide numerous other services, including hosting local biodiversity and helping the management of urban inundation.

Objectives of the stakeholders' dialogue

- 1) To take stock of the context of wetland conservation – legal, climate, finance and socio-economic
- 2) To give a platform to the wetland communities to reach government stakeholders
- 3) To allow case study sharing regarding wetland conservation by the community
- 4) To especially integrate women into decisions made on wetland governance
- 5) To facilitate a conversation on state wetland policy
- 6) To flag the priority issues for governing a unique Wetland of International Importance, viz. the East Kolkata Wetlands, which completes its 20th year of Ramsar recognition.

Who may attend?

Government departments and institutions, expert scientists, fisherfolk communities, wetland conservationists, special-purpose NGOs, educational institutions connected with wetland research (preferably wetland science), media, others such as students, teachers and those interested in protecting wetlands and water bodies. We encourage women participants to attend.

Format of the conference

It will be a 2-day conference, where the first day is devoted to wetlands all over West Bengal and the second day to the East Kolkata Wetlands. The proceedings will include films, speeches by the community members and panel discussions by stakeholders.

Venue of the conference:

K P Basu Memorial Hall

Indumati Sabhagriha

Date and timings:

August 30, Tuesday, 10.30 to 5.00 P.M.

August 31, Wednesday, 10.30 to 5.00 P.M.

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About the organisers of the conference:

Society for Creative Opportunities and Participatory Ecosystems (SCOPE)

SCOPE (www.scopekolkata.org) was formed in 2010 with the idea of pursuing action research on ecosystem conservation, with an emphasis on wetland ecosystems. It works with communities on the margin. Its members dreamt of working on rural development, livelihood generation through creative interventions in agriculture, rural health issues, urban ecology, waste management, city and the environment. Since those associated with the organisation have a strong backdrop of working in the East Kolkata Wetlands, our current ecosystem focus is on these wetlands.

Society for Direct Initiative for Social and Health Action (DISHA)

Since inception in 1995, DISHA (www.dishaeath.org) has been active on different issues concerning environment, environmental health, and human rights. It has focused on municipal waste management, industrial pollution, toxicity, coastal environment, biodiversity, nature-oriented farming, conservation, and energy issues. DISHA has been campaigning against filling up of water bodies and wetlands, has taken part in movements for conservation, and has been engaged in various efforts to protect wetlands. It has been involved in protecting the rights of small scale fishworker communities in the marine and inland sectors as these communities are the natural custodians of water bodies.

Department of English, Jadavpur University

The Department of English, Jadavpur University, founded in 1956, is the only Centre of Advanced Study in its discipline, a status awarded to it in 2004 by the University Grants Commission. In its long and distinguished history, it has attracted some of the best scholars and researchers in India. Past heads of department include Subodh Chandra Sengupta, Kitty Scoular Datta, and Sukanta Chaudhuri. Its chosen field of research for the CAS Programme is 'Textuality and Culture' (second phase: 'Cultural Transactions'), and the work of its members has ranged from the Renaissance to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, translation, the history of the book, literature and psychoanalysis, subaltern literatures and oratures, postcolonial literature, media, gender, travel, popular literature, creative writing and theatre studies, producing, in the past five years alone, over 80 academic books under imprints such as Permanent Black and Oxford University Press, and over 200 articles in refereed journals.

