



CONFERENCE REPORT

Connecting Wetland Narratives to Action Plan: A Stakeholders Dialogue 30th August, 2022 – 31st August, 2022

Organised Jointly by

Society for Creative Opportunities and Participatory Ecosystems (SCOPE)

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

Department of English, Jadavpur University

K P Basu Memorial Hall - Tuesday, 30 August 2022 and

Indumati Sabhagriha - Wednesday 31 August, 2022

This conference was held to promote a stakeholder dialogue so that we better understand the challenges that the primary stakeholders namely the wetland community, face while carrying out their livelihood activities, nurturing the wetlands in the process. Hearing their experiences was the key to understanding the priorities for management purposes and know what will conserve the wetlands best. This would improve ecosystem sustainability, and additionally strengthen our future against climate uncertainties. The conference also intended to provide space to women's participation, and suggest ways for integrating their livelihood concerns with the overall wetland protection agenda.

The key objectives of the conference were:

- 1) To take stock of the context of wetland conservation – legal, climate-related, financial 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.

This was a first-of-its-kind opportunity to hear the voices of grassroots wetland protectors.

Audience of the conference

The audience consisted of Government departments and institutions, expert scientists, fisherfolk communities, wetland conservationists, special-purpose NGOs, activists, educational institutions connected with wetland research (especially wetland science),

media, others such as students, teachers and those interested in protecting wetlands and water bodies. Women speakers and participants had a noticeable presence.

The format of the conference and discussions

The first day of the conference was devoted to discussions on law and policy, especially in the light of judgments by the Supreme Court, the Calcutta High Court and the National Green Tribunal.

A specific court case seeking identification and legal protection of the Dankuni wetlands, which continued for 10 years, recently concluded before the National Green Tribunal on 9th May, 2022 with a judgment in favour of protecting these wetlands along with expanding its original mandate to now protect all wetlands, water bodies and flood plains in West Bengal. In doing this, the community has to be consulted, it was pointed out.

Another long running legal intervention before the National Green Tribunal on the East Kolkata Wetlands (EKW) concluded on the 28th of April, 2022 whereby the Tribunal passed several directions regarding ensuring adequate flow of sewage into EKW and clearing illegal encroachments.

In the context of the Dankuni wetlands judgment, the Department of Fisheries is mapping 2,457 wetlands in the state which have been identified as being above 2.25 hectares and also geotagging them, seeking to complete this exercise by October-end. This initiative also seeks to provide information on the present status of the wetlands thus mapped.

The conference began by discussing the methods of identifying wetlands and perspectives on wetland monitoring and ecological health assessment, with a special reference to coastal wetlands – West Bengal has a 210 km long coastline which is home to a rich species mix of flora and fauna and various livelihood practices.

Coastal wetlands are an important area needing attention, because unsustainable aquaculture practices mainly shrimp farming that relies on big capital has destroyed many hectares of mangroves and also existing freshwater wetlands and led to huge salinity ingress and loss of cultivable land. It has also led to increasing vulnerability of coastal ecosystems to extreme weather events, inflicted immense damage on the social, economic and political structure of the coastal areas and compounded the loss of ecological security.

It was pointed out that the management approach adapted by South East Asian countries to tackle this crisis was by engaging in a combination of mangroves as well as aquaculture so that shrimp seeds can be sourced without damaging mangroves. Our state needs to seriously think about the problem of managing its coastal wetlands.

The conference subsequently discussed the issues facing freshwater and non sewage-based wetlands as well as sewage-fed wetlands and the legal and policy aspects with respect to these. Possibly the most important binding issue regarding recognition of fishery as an activity and of fish-workers' rights came from the observations of the representative from the Department of Fisheries who pointed out that current laws do not acknowledge the rights to water and livelihood rights of fishing communities.

The scientist of Centre Inland Fisheries Research Institute (CIFRI) who was also the expert member from the State Wetland Authority mentioned that the carbon mitigation potential of wetlands at 8-10% is far higher than terrestrial ecosystems (1%). Hence wetlands needed to be given more attention in the context of developing resilience against climate change. Better

management of wetlands could be ensured by segregating industrial pollutants, protecting against plastic and microplastic pollution and nurturing aquatic life under water, which were some of the steps that could be taken.

A rich array of testimonies by wetland community from different districts in West Bengal (Dakshin Dinajpur, Murshidabad, North 24 Parganas, South 24 Parganas) which included women showed that overall, wetlands lacked constituency. Rural wetlands were subjected to proverbial neglect and their issues often remained outside political and administrative ambit. On the other hand, especially peri-urban wetlands suffered from constant threat of encroachment. Adequate attention had to be paid to need-based engineering interventions such as sluice gates, dredging and de-siltation of wetlands, proper care of hydrological regimes to ensure the connection of wetlands to major water supply source (usually the river), managing aquatic life under water, and managing macro and microplastic pollution which is a hazard to aquatic life and even human health. In case of sewage-fed wetlands that were outside the East Kolkata Wetlands area, community testimony showed that it had to be ensured that industrial effluents did not enter sewage-fed fisheries, and effective steps had to be taken to ensure that pesticides were not sprayed into sewage-fed fisheries in the name of anti-malaria and anti-dengue drives.

For all the above, local governments and administrative bodies had to understand their roles clearly.

Day 2 was devoted entirely to discussing the East Kolkata Wetlands. The idea was to discuss wetland governance of a unique Wetland of International Importance and how to ensure its sustainability. The inaugural session showed 2 films and was followed by the inaugural lecture which emphasised that the people of the wetlands needed to be compensated for the services they provided to the city, saving crores of rupees in sewage treatment costs but ironically, there was really insufficient effort and expenditure to keep the ecosystem sustainable. On the other hand, the rising costs of production served as a disincentive to the wetland community, whose earnings did not keep pace with the rising costs. Most importantly, the voices from the wetland community needed to be heard to understand how to improve the sustainability of the ecosystem and find solutions to the challenges being faced.

A wide array of issues was discussed between government representatives and the wetland community dealing with the crisis in sewage supply. Sewage is the main resource that ensures the continuation of eco-friendly livelihood practices of these wetlands and ascertains carbon sequestration. A communication gap between various government departments was identified as a key lacuna that hindered the smooth supply of sewage in these wetlands.

De-silting of bheries was stressed by wetland community members as equally important as excavation of sewage-carrying canals. One of the experts suggested that it was necessary to look at innovative ways to de-silt the fish ponds, such as tying up with the brick kilns close by, as good soil available from excavating wetlands was always in high demand by brick manufacturers.

It was highlighted that multiple possibilities existed for enhancing the productivity of the wetlands by a variety of ways such as improving oxygen level in the fish ponds through aeration, exploiting new methods of fish culture such as breeding fish in eco-hatchery within the wetlands in relatively small space, breeding and seed production of Common Carp, and also introducing other types of commercially viable fish which could grow profitably. Here it must be mentioned that the paucity of finance, that was first discussed the previous day, remains a practical hurdle faced by the community. Another crisis is that of tenurial

uncertainty. The above factors impact the ability of the community to manage the health of the wetlands and allowing them to perform their ecological functions.

As a way forward, it was discussed that a multi-pronged approach to increase productivity that would rely on integrated farming or mixed farming including animal husbandry and agriculture in fisheries was the most pragmatic way of increasing production. In this, animal husbandry was seen as especially suitable for roping in women to generate extra income.

A holistic approach to provide an enabling environment for the wetland community needed adequate attention towards public health issues (including drinking water issues for EKW) and the importance of these issues vis-à-vis women was touched upon.

Both the morning and the afternoon sessions began with documentaries on the East Kolkata Wetlands – one on crisis of sewage in EKW and the other on the challenges to productivity on EKW. These will be used later for knowledge dissemination purposes.

Listening to the wetland community and activists

The testimonies offered by the wetland grassroot practitioners was a key exercise that lent the most important dimension to the entire conference. Overall, their words pointed to the prevailing government absence in the area of wetland governance. As mentioned before, the near total absence of institutional financial support needed to carry out sustainable, non-consumptive fishing activities, and granting of user rights over water bodies to the community, stood out as the most important areas of concern.

Activists present at the conference came more from urban areas and many of their testimonies showed that they faced a lot of personal security issues in their fight against illegal filling up of water bodies. Municipal authorities need to compulsory put in place grievance redressal mechanisms and coordinate internally with other departments in the municipality/ municipal corporation to achieve results. Municipal areas need location-based conservation attention.

Importance of data

To manage a wetland properly, good data is needed. This was highlighted on both days. On the first day, the process of building up a crucial database containing information on parameter-based health assessment of coastal wetlands in West Bengal was discussed. It was suggested, for example, that there should be block-level wetland atlas where inputs could be given by local stakeholders such as schools.

On the second day an enumeration exercise was discussed that was carried out for the first time by SCOPE in a revenue village in the East Kolkata wetlands called Hatgachha. The livelihood information generated from this survey showed the extent of fragmentation of sewage-based livelihood practices in the East Kolkata Wetlands and the resulting insecurity that has become an abiding reality there. In this village about 59 per cent people do not practice sewage-based livelihood any more. Also, the survey showed an unmarked drinking water crisis that the administration was unaware of. People spend 5-7% of their monthly earnings on drinking water.

Data paucity also exists in other wetlands in West Bengal. This is a key lacuna in good governance.

Key conference learnings

1. Wetlands are our crucial ally in our fight against climate change. Their wise use is key to our ability to promote sustainable development. In this context, the aim should be natural resource management to promote livelihood rather than commercialise and maximise exploitation.
2. West Bengal has 1.06 lakh hectare of wetland resource, which include fresh water, brackish water, wastewater and cold water systems.
3. A database of information about existing wetlands is essential, like block-level wetland atlas, without which future management of wetlands will be impossible.
4. A comprehensive baseline data of demography and wetland use by the community has to be prepared, which must be made available in the public domain.
5. The current status of fishery as a residual activity in aquatic sector needs to be re-oriented, as aquaculture is eco-friendly activity providing nutritional security and livelihood support.
6. Statutory Rights are needed for communities who are dependent on wise use of wetlands, especially fishers and other small users.
7. Along with Statutory Rights, we also need a state wetland policy. A draft policy was already completed in 2012 which needs to be improved through further workshops and consultations and placed before the government for adoption.
8. The government needs to engage the community, especially marginalised wetland users and women, to get feedback to inventorise wetlands larger than 2.25 hectares and a proper cell to receive information regarding preparation of Brief Documents for wetlands identified for conservation.
9. District and state level authorities require awareness, training and administrative clarification on their roles and responsibilities towards wetland protection, receiving complaints from the public, keeping records, carrying out hearing and such other duties. Therefore, due notifications must be issued through gazette publication by the government stating in detail, roles and responsibilities of each authorities.
10. A one-size fits all approach in wetland management is completely avoidable. On the other hand, zone-wise management plan is needed.
11. Women play a crucial role in wetland conservation and they must compulsorily be included in any livelihood improvement initiative connected to wetlands.
12. Peri-urban sewage-fed fishery needs to be given due recognition as income earner.
13. Wetland-related financing mechanisms need to be seriously considered through another roundtable discussion.
14. More roundtable initiatives are needed to ensure an enabling action plan to supply more sewage to the East Kolkata Wetlands.
15. With respect to East Kolkata Wetlands, animal husbandry was identified as a key area where women would have to be empowered through targeted programmes for income improvement and financial well-being.

16. Provisions are needed for the regular health check of the wetlands based on a list of common parameters arrived at with expert help.
17. Assess the carbon sequestration potential of wetlands which are being inventorised.
18. Wetlands in municipal areas need location-based conservation attention.

Outcomes achieved

1. The conference introduced the stakeholders to each other in the same platform.
2. It identified the elements critical to overall wetland management namely securing of livelihood rights for fisherfolk, database building, monitoring the health of wetlands and ensuring access to sustained finance for the twin goals of conservation and livelihood stability.
3. It established the importance of peri-urban and urban sewage-fed fishery as needing conservation attention.
4. It set the ball rolling for specific action plans to emerge for different types of wetland conservation.
5. It established the importance of women as stakeholders in wetland conservation who needed to benefit from tangible measures to empower them.

Way forward

A charter of demands will be placed before the Department of Environment, Government of West Bengal regarding the requirements of the wetland community. That includes points derived from the key conference learnings. This will be followed up for further action.

PICTURES



ENCORE: This is a mix of pictures taken from both days of the conference showing a mix of participants – community, academics and experts, women from marginalised communities and government representatives.

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.dishaeearth.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.