

# Youngsters join mission to conserve wetlands

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**Kolkata:** The East Kolkata Wetland Management Authority (EKWMA) will organise regular field trips of students to the Ramsar site to help them discover its rich ecology, to which very few are exposed, despite its proximity to the city.

The EKWMA chief technical officer, K Balamurugan, said the organisation had tied up with a non-government action group to conduct regular field trips of students to the wetlands, the existence of which is critical to the city's survival.

**TIMES VIEW:** We need to do much more to protect what remains of our wetlands. Unrestrained development at the cost of wetlands can exacerbate the effects of weather events like big floods and storms. It helps if we can inculcate in the future generation a greater awareness of our long-term green goals.

"It is our endeavour to introduce young citizens to the wetlands. Very few cities in the world have such a vast expanse of greenery and water bodies. Not only does it sustain a large variety of flora and fauna but it also acts as a huge carbon sink. Unlike Mumbai and Bengaluru that have had deaths due to floods during the monsoon, Kolkata does not sink because the run-off water flows into the wetlands. The wetlands also serve as a natural sewage treatment plant for the city. People in Kolkata also have the wetlands to thank for the fish, vegetables and paddy that is produced there," said Balamurugan.

The EKWMA and PUBLIC, an NGO, on Thursday conducted a joint programme for around 30 school and college students and showcased the diversity of birds and plants that the 25,000 acres have on offer.

"Kolkata is blessed with the largest peri urban wetlands in the country, with its benefits to the city's hydro-

logy and climate resilience. Its uniqueness has also been internationally recognized for its "wise use" — drawing advantages without harming the ecosystem. Wise uses include natural treatment of the city's sewage, fish and agricultural farming. But one potential wise use that has not been seen enough is the use of the East Kolkata Wetlands for educational and ecotourism purposes. A small step in that direction was taken on World Wetlands Day," said PUBLIC founder Bonani Kakkar.

Recently, a Rs 66-crore Integrated Management Plan was officially adopted and this money would be available over the next five years for carrying out various essential improvements in this wetland ecosystem.

Society for Creative Opportunities and Participatory Ecosystems (SCOPE) project director Dhruva Das Gupta said that appropriate prioritisation of tasks and wise use of available financial resources after consulting the wetland community would be helpful in making

the implementation of the plan a success. On Thursday, it facilitated conversations between two generations on the current condition of the wetlands and intergenerational knowledge transfer needed to keep the wetlands alive and also remembered wetland ecologist Dhrubajyoti Ghosh and his efforts to get Ramsar recognition for these wetlands.

Sujit Mondal, a third generation fish farmer, said that the wetland community is unable to conserve it and needs commensurate and constant cooperation by the state government, Central government as well as the Ramsar authorities that will appropriately incentivise the community to continue with the tough but necessary task of conservation. "The livelihood rights of wetland communities need to be guaranteed," Mondal emphasised. "Laws alone do not protect the wetlands. The voices of those who live in the wetlands and ensure that the bheris and farmlands are still there must be heard," said Das Gupta.

## WISE USE OF CITY'S AQUACULTURE



Bonani Kakkar, founder of PUBLIC, an NGO, explains to students the importance of conserving wetlands

► There are 254 sewage-fed fish ponds, agricultural land, garbage-farming areas and settlements in the 125 sq km of wetlands to the east of Kolkata

► The wetlands support the largest wastewater-fed aquaculture system in the world where the sewage is recycled for pisciculture and agriculture

► The wetlands naturally treat the city's waste water in 20 days through a process called bioremediation

► Experts estimate the



Fish farming is a major means of livelihood for the wetland community

savings from sewage treatment costs at Rs 468 crore a year

► Around 18,000 tonnes of fish and 150 tonnes of vegetables are produced there daily