

PRESS RELEASE

From the Productive to the Uncertain – release of research report on East Kolkata Wetlands

A study report on the results of the primary survey of unauthorised units engaged in various types of commercial activity in the East Kolkata Wetlands puts the number of units at 603. These units can be divided into six broad types – plastic sorting and recycling units (biggest category which includes 376 units), building materials units, garage, car servicing and car wash units, showrooms and storerooms of marble units, studios, hotel and restaurants and a large bunch of 121 miscellaneous units. These units include large warehouses, engineering shops, bakery factory, bank customer service point, to name a few.

The study was carried out by Society for Creative Opportunities and Participatory Ecosystems (SCOPE), a non-profit that has been engaged in both documentation and livelihood improvement activities of the wetland community of the Ramsar site. The field-work included about a week's reconnaissance work and a week's counting and re-counting. Actual counting was done in the last week of May.

The report is being released on the occasion of the 21st anniversary of EKW's inclusion in the Ramsar list on 19th August 2002.

The report finds that the most menacing threat is from the plastic waste sorting and recycling units which make up more than 60% of the unauthorised units in the wetlands. They have had the strongest impact on vegetable cultivation especially covering Dhapa (Ward 58) and fish production in Ward 108 of the Kolkata Municipal Corporation. In the panchayat areas, Kheadaha I Gram Panchayat is seeing a mushrooming of plastic units, dislodging productive paddy fields.

Another unusual finding of the survey is the plan to create a burial ground on the embankment at the starting of the East Kolkata Wetlands – in fact, just close to the signboard announcing the entry into the Sundarbans. There is a real threat of solid waste accumulation issues if enhanced human activity is allowed in this place because it is already heavily encroached by plastic units.

An estimation of loss of value of some of the ecosystem services provided by these wetlands has been carried out in this report. Using earlier primary survey figures and adjusting for loss of land area, the estimated loss of value of food produced is Rs 55.61 crores annually.

The report also speaks about the ecological subsidy provided by these wetlands to the citizens of Kolkata. Using figures from a typical US city in the east coast such as Philadelphia the report demonstrates that an average US senior citizen pays about Rs 56,000.00 per year for sewage treatment and stormwater management services. In contrast, the average Kolkata citizen pays nothing extra for these services.

The thrust of this report is to demonstrate that the loss of productivity of these wetlands has a specific pattern – it is to downplay the extremely valuable services that these wetlands guarantee and let the wetland community believe in their uncertain future.

Looking at the bigger picture, the impact of more than 20 years of Ramsar recognition has not been able to bring about any change in the business as usual scenario of wetland

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destruction, or the recognition of the destiny that faces Kolkata if we continue to violate the Ramsar guidelines of wetland conservation with characteristic impunity.

Dhruba Das Gupta, Project Director of SCOPE, and lead author of the study observes, 'By neglecting the management of these wetlands, those who govern and those who are governed, are working together to obfuscate what could have served as a model of sanitation management and resource recovery. It is beyond sanity and a real shame to throw away a lifesaver that is the East Kolkata Wetlands and endanger our own living.'

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