

# Wetland Conservation Program in India

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India has a federal structure with about 28 states and nine union territories. Water in India is a state subject whereby the central government normally prepares the governance policy and gives direction to the water management in all the states. In terms of wetlands management, our basic work at the Ministry of Environment and Forests is to develop an inventory, extend policy and financial support to states and UT's for conservation, restoration, and management of wetlands in their respective territory, monitoring and development of information and decision support system. Capacity development of the site managers of the country has been the priority of the MoEF &CC. We also look after the Ramsar sites and ensure that the international commitments are met.

Pragmatic steps by us have been the inventory of the wetlands of India and digitally mapped wetlands up to 2.25 hectares and developed a National Wetland Atlas in the year 2011. The Atlas is put in the public domain and is being used by all states and UTs. Now we are in the process of a follow-up inventory to assess the changes that have been taken place.

The regulatory framework includes Wetlands (Conservation and Management) Rules at the federal level, enacted in 2010 and amended in 2017. The rules are a significant step to provide policy support to conserve, manage and maintain the ecological character of wetlands without restricting their wise use. Guidelines to help states to implement the rules have been released. Each state has established a state wetland authority which is composed of members from all relevant departments such as fisheries, agriculture, irrigation, tourism, and revenue and headed by the Forest & Environment Minister of the state. They hold regular meetings, based on the shared Atlas demarcate and notify the wetlands and prioritize the degraded wetlands. A separate ministry called "Jal Shakti" which means "power of water" in Hindi had been established by the Government of India to look after the water resources. There is an increasing demand for water in accordance with the growing population and expanding economic activities. The Government of India has decided that it is time that water is brought into the mainstream. Under Jal Shakti, the water stress districts across the country have been identified, and special measures have been taken for the restoration of water bodies. For the first time, an integrated approach in the implementation of the Ganga rejuvenation programme has been initiated and riverine wetlands conservation has been integrated into the Ganga basin (integration of lentic – lotic water). This effort is being initiated for other rivers also.

The National Plan of Conservation on Aquatic Ecosystems (NPCA) has been initiated by the MoEF&CC, Government of India. In this program, the government of India provides funding and technical to the states & UTs for prioritized wetlands by the state governments that are notified under Wetlands Rule and the Integrated Management Plan is developed for the wetland. Recently, we have initiated a special project on rejuvenating wetlands which we call "The 4 Pronged Approach". We have identified about 130 important wetlands across the country and have followed this four-pronged strategy to rejuvenate them. At first, we make a "Brief Document" containing the baseline data about the extent of the wetland and its zone of influence, biodiversity, and ecosystem services. Next, we prepared a "Heath Card" by monitoring various indicators. To garner community support and participation the concept of "Wetland Mitras" which means

“Friends of Wetlands” is being practiced. It is a citizen network to enable the participation of local stakeholders in conservation and wise use of wetlands. Finally, an “Integrated Management Plan” is prepared. The management plan is drawn to maintain the full range of biodiversity and ecosystem services and values of the wetland, now and into the future.

At the moment, we have many technical institutions that are looking at different issues of wetland management, examples of such centers being the National Institute of Himalayan Environment, National Centre for Sustainable Coastal Management, Salim Ali Centre for Ornithology, and Natural History and Space Application Centre. We have also developed a national center for wetlands to look at all wetland issues on a national scale, and which could also become a kind of a training center for all wetland managers.

The way forward for us is to strengthen the implementation of the Ramsar Convention, to enhance regional cooperation, to designate more wetlands and Ramsar sites, and to promote integrated management and conservation of wetlands. We are moving towards the preparation of integrated management plans for all the wetlands.