

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. India is home to 18% of the global human population and 15% of the global livestock population, it has only 2% of landmass and 4% of global freshwater resources. In terms of wetlands management, the basic work at the Ministry of Environment and Forests is to develop an inventory, setup information and decision support system for the various states, developing policy guidelines conservation of aquatic ecosystems, restoration of prioritized ecosystems. We also organize capacity development programs for the various wetland managers across the country. And we look after the Ramsar Convention sites and strengthen the implementation of the international commitments.

As for the wetland inventory, National Wetland Atlas was prepared in the year 2011. Now we are in the process of preparing a change Atlas to see what changes have been taken place. We have digitally mapped wetlands of up to 2.25 hectares and now they are in the Atlas which is available in the public domain and is being used by all states.

The regulatory framework includes Wetlands (Conservation and Management) Rules at the federal level, established in 2010 and amended in 2017. The rules are a significant step to conserve, manage and maintain the ecological character of wetlands without restricting their wise use. Guidelines to help states 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 biodiversity and headed by the Chief Minister of the state. They hold regular meetings based on the shared Atlas to prepare the inventory of wetlands including lakes and prioritize the degraded wetlands. Just two years back, 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 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 stressed districts across the country have been identified, and special measures have been taken for restoration of water bodies. For the first time, an integrated approach in implementation of the Ganga rejuvenation programme has been initiated and riverine wetlands conservation has been integrated in 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 Government of India. In this program, the federal government provides support for wetlands which have been prioritized by state governments as needing support, funding and expert intervention. 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 made 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 “Health Card” by monitoring various indicators. Then we apply the concept of “Wetland Mitras” which means “Friends of Wetlands”. 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 active centers 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 are now planning to develop 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.