

## Ramsar tag likely for Sunderbans

Lost haven: Fishermen get down to work at Satyanarayanpur village in the Sunderbans. The wetland faces a threat from climate change and rise in sea level. AP Bikas Das

The Sunderban Reserve Forest, spread of 4,260 sq. km. with over 2,000 sq. km. of mangrove forests and creeks, is likely to be declared a Ramsar Site soon. Earlier this week, the West Bengal government gave its approval to the State Forest Department to apply for recognition under the Ramsar Convention.

“We have got approval from the government. All the necessary documents are ready and through the Government of India, we will apply to the Ramsar Convention Secretariat. It will take anything between three and six months for the status,” Ravi Kanta Sinha, Principal Chief Conservator of Forests, West Bengal, told *The Hindu*.

Mr. Sinha said, being conferred the status of a wetland of international importance will not only be a matter of pride for the Sunderbans but also bring a lot of international scientific attention and intervention to the area.

The Indian Sunderbans, with 2,114 sq. km. of mangrove forests, comprise almost 43% of the mangrove cover in the country according to a 2017 Forest Survey of India report. Other than the forests, home to about 100 Royal Bengal tigers, the creeks and river systems of the Sunderbans are also part of the reserve forest and once conferred a Ramsar site status, it will be the largest protected wetland in the country.

There are currently 26 sites in India recognised as Ramsar wetland sites of international importance, including the East Kolkata Wetlands also in West Bengal.

### Alarming reduction

Experts, however have been raising questions about increased encroachment at the East Kolkata Wetlands.

“Spread over 125-square-km (12,500 hectare) the wetland area of the water bodies have been decreasing over the past three decades. In 1986, the percentage of water bodies was 30.6% which dropped to 26.3% and in 2011 further dropped to 24.7%,” Ajanta Dey, joint secretary of Nature Environment and Wildlife Society, said.

Environmental activist Subhas Datta said the Sunderbans is already a World Heritage Site, and another feather in its cap as a Ramsar site will not help in its conservation, even as the recognition has not helped the East Kolkata Wetlands. “What is required is the implementation of existing laws and regulations by the tribunals. I have submitted more than 500 photos citing environmental degradation of the Sunderbans before the National Green Tribunal,” Mr. Datta said.

Other than threats such as climate change, sea level rise, widespread construction and clearing of mangrove forests for fisheries is posing a danger to the Sunderbans. Ms. Dey said another threat is the 1,320-megawatt coal-based thermal power plant at Rampal, just a few kilometres north of the reserve forest in Bangladesh.

“Sunderbans is a contiguous ecosystem spread across India and Bangladesh and any adverse move will affect the entire ecosystem. We had raised the issue at the IUCN [International Union for Conservation of Nature] meeting of 2017,” she said.

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