

ASSAM'S DEEPAR BEEL WILDLIFE SANCTUARY BREATHES EASY AFTER ECO-SENSITIVE ZONE NOTIFICATION

Relevant for: Environment | Topic: Biodiversity, Ecology, and Wildlife Related Issues

A view of the railway track that passes through the wildlife sanctuary in Assam. File | Photo Credit: [The Hindu](#)

On August 25, the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change notified the eco-sensitive zone of the [Deepar Beel Wildlife Sanctuary](#) on the south-western edge of Guwahati.

Deepar Beel is one of the largest freshwater lakes in Assam and the State's only [Ramsar site](#) besides being an Important Bird Area. The wetland has for decades been threatened by a railway track — set to be doubled and electrified — on its southern rim, a garbage dump, and encroachment from human habitation and commercial units.

The notification specified an area “to an extent varying from 294 metres to 16.32 km” as the eco-sensitive zone, with the total area being 148.9767 sq. km.

But being adjacent to “fast-developing Guwahati”, the sanctuary is “facing immense biotic pressure by way of human settlements and ever-increasing development activities”, the notification said.

The wetland expands up to 30 sq. km in summer and reduces to about 10 sq. km in the winter. The wildlife sanctuary measures 4.1 sq. km within this wetland.

Romila Boro, a sexagenarian resident of Chakardeo, the sanctuary's “guardian village”, hopes the notification will bail the constricted wetland out. But she is sad that the “good news” has come eight years too late. It was in 2014 that her husband Koliya Boro was run over by a speeding train while trying to stop from hitting an approaching herd of elephants. He was one of the earliest conservationists of the area.

“The zonation should help, but Deepar Beel's water has become toxic and it has lost many of its aquatic plants that elephants would feed on. The wetland can breathe easier only if the railway track is diverted,” said Chakardeo dairy farmer and green guard Pramod Kalita.

“No new commercial hotels and resorts shall be permitted within 1 km of the boundary of the protected area or up to the extent of the eco-sensitive zone, whichever is nearer, except for small temporary structures for eco-tourism activities,” the notification said.

Disallowing new sawmills or the expansion of existing sawmills in the vicinity, the notification said a new wood-based industry may be set up in the eco-sensitive zone using 100% imported wood stock.

Among activities prohibited in the eco-sensitive zone are hydroelectric projects, brick kilns, commercial use of firewood and discharge of untreated effluents in natural water bodies or land areas.

Deepar Beel has long been used as a sponge for Guwahati's sewage via a couple of streams. The wetland has also suffered from seepage of toxins from a garbage dump at Boragaon

adjoining it.

“The wetland of Deepar Beel constitutes a unique habitat for aquatic flora and avian fauna. About 150 species of birds have been recorded in the sanctuary, out of which two are critically endangered, one endangered, five vulnerable and four near-threatened,” the notification said.

“Elephants regularly visit the wetland from adjoining Rani and Garhbhanda Reserve Forest and the wetland is an integral part of the elephant habitat. Besides these, 12 species of reptiles, 50 species of fish, six species of amphibians along with 155 species of aquatic macro-biota have been recorded in the sanctuary,” it said.

“City wastes as well as industrial effluents causing serious problem to the ecological and environmental values of the rich wetland that create a threat to all life forms and ecosystems in the Deepar Beel,” it added, also noting the railway track along the wetland’s southern boundary with concern.

Wildlife specialist Bibhab Talukdar said if the implementation of the rules is weak, it does not really matter if the eco-sensitive zone extends 10 km or 10 metres beyond a protected area.

“Deepar Beel needs the unabated movement of wild elephants and birds and it should be a smart model of the balance between developmental projects and maintaining the ecological processes of a wetland that is essential for human wellbeing,” he said.

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The report said, the world will cross the 1.5° C warming mark in the 2030s, earlier than past predictions.

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