

CONSERVING THE WETLANDS OF ANDHRA PRADESH

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In a first attempt to map the wetlands of Andhra Pradesh, the Forest Department has identified 26 new wetlands and collaborated with WWF - India to prepare documents and wetland health cards.

The project was initiated in 2019-20 with an aim to notify the water bodies officially as wetlands, which provides legal protection under the Wetland Protection Rules, 2017. The findings brought to light many significant issues. “Most wetlands had similar issues — siltation, changes in drainage pattern — inflows and outflows, encroachment and spread of invasive alien species,” says Farida Tampal, State Director, WWF - India.

During the survey, many species of birds, especially aquatic, were noted. “Ibis, pelican, duck, coot and cormorant, pheasant tailed jacana and bronze-winged jacana, sandpiper and sand plover were spotted in the wetlands. The notable ones are the great knot and Indian skimmer that have been noticed in wetlands around Kakinada but have faced threats of development, wiping out their foraging grounds. Many mangrove associated plant species are also found in marine wetlands like Coringa, Krishna,” says Farida.

The project also surveyed lesser known wetlands like Perali Porugu near Guntur, which had good biodiversity. “In Visakhapatnam there are many wetlands that have dried up. It is imperative to safeguard the ones that are left,” says Divisional Forest Officer Ananth Shankar. He adds, “One of the main wetlands here is Kondakarla Ava. It is unique for its location as well as the biodiversity it hosts.” The freshwater wetland is host to over 150 species of birds and has a rich biodiversity with a range of fish, aquatic, animal and plant species. “Identifying and notifying wetlands is one way to safeguard wetlands. To keep the natural characteristics intact, the inflow and outflow channels of water need to be cleared, water levels should be monitored, suitable endemic species need to be introduced and bio-remediation of water (a process used to treat water, soil) needs to be initiated,” says Ananth.

The wetlands of Andhra Pradesh are also home to some species listed as ‘threatened’ in the IUCN Red List. The Eastern Ghats Wildlife Society (EGWS), an organisation working towards wildlife conservation in the region, documented the presence of smooth-coated otters from the wetlands of Krishna River Delta in Krishna and Guntur districts back in 2016. “Incidentally, we have also documented signs of smooth-coated otters from the wetlands of Visakhapatnam and East-Godavari districts in the recent years. There are negative interactions between otter and fishing communities due to snatching of fish catch and damage of fishing gear by otters leading to economic loss,” says Murthy Kantimahanti, founder of EGWS.

Smaller animal communities like invertebrates, fish and amphibians are indicators of ecosystem health. Healthy populations of these animals indicate the overall health of the wetland. “Higher mammals like smooth-coated otters depend on this prey base for their survival. There are also species such as the fishing cat which is strongly associated with wetlands. Especially adapted to surviving in the wetlands, they are often used as an ‘ambassador’ for conservation,” Murthy adds.

Currently, these habitats are heavily fragmented and degraded due to anthropogenic activities like sand mining, agricultural intensification, aquaculture ponds, overgrazing, deforestation, poaching and unsustainable fishing practices. “There are also increasing instances of human-wildlife conflicts that need conservation interventions. Engaging local communities to safeguard

these precious habitats, recognition of these areas for conservation, legal protection and regulation of human activities is critical for conservation of such unprotected and heavily exploited wetland habitats,” says Murthy. The Ramsar Convention definition for wetlands includes marshes, floodplains, rivers and lakes, mangroves, coral reefs and other marine areas no deeper than six metres at low tide, as well as human-made wetlands such as waste-water treatment ponds and reservoirs. “Unfortunately, wetlands are still regarded as wastelands in many of these areas and their significance is largely ignored,” Murthy adds.

Wetlands in Andhra Pradesh host several resident and migratory birds like black-bellied tern, spot-billed pelican, Asian open bills, Pallas’ fish eagle, Indian river tern, green shank and Eurasian curlew. Deccan mahseer is an endangered fish species inhabiting the Sileru river basin of the North Eastern Ghats.

Big or small, they play a critical role in temperature regulation and ground water recharge. “Governments spend huge amounts for supplying water to homes. Today, rivers are being tapped to bring water to the city. We ignore the fact that if the water bodies are protected, they will help in recharging our groundwater table. It requires huge infrastructure to bring river water to our houses. Heat island effects are well known in built-up areas, especially in the urban and semi-urban areas. Water bodies help regulate heat and are therefore critical to be protected,” explains Farida.

Experts say that each notified wetland can have a multi-stakeholder committee to maintain and monitor the wetland. “The committee should be inter-departmental, have wetland experts, political representatives as well as local people,” states Farida, adding “Unless the immediate communities are made equal stakeholders and not alienated from using the water bodies, protection will never be achieved.”

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