

WORLD WETLANDS DAY: IN ANDHRA PRADESH, EFFORTS ON TO SAVE A UNIQUE WETLAND NEAR VISAKHAPATNAM

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An aerial view of Kondakarlava, a unique wetland near Visakhapatnam that is a home to over 150 bird species and also has a rich biodiversity like aquatic species and plants. | Photo Credit: KR Deepak

A group of environmentalists documented four smooth-coated otters in the Kondakarlava wetland in 2021. The team has photographic evidence of the same, thanks to a camera trap they set as part of a project to document the biodiversity of the region by the East Coast Conservation Team (ECCT) and Green Paw that works in Visakhapatnam. "This was the first documented record of the smooth-coated otters which is listed as Threatened in the IUCN list," says Sri Chakra Pranav Tamarapalli of ECCT, adding that locals have, in fact, reported 10 to 12 families of the shy otters in the wetland. "We have also found indirect evidence of fishing cat, civet cat and monitor lizards among other species in the area."

An aerial view of Kondakarla Ava lake in Anakapalli district. | Photo Credit: KR Deepak

Kondakarlava is located about 48 kilometres from Visakhapatnam. It is the second largest freshwater wetland of Andhra Pradesh, yet to be declared as a protected site. Spread across 750 acres, it is host to over 150 species of birds and has a rich biodiversity with a range of fish, aquatic, animal and plant species. In an effort to protect the unique ecosystem, Kondakarla Ava Wetland Management Committee was formed last year with the support of the AP Forest Department and Anakapalle district administration. "We have sent a proposal for declaring it as a wetland. The place requires urgent intervention to regulate eco-tourism and proper demarcation with bio-fencing to avoid encroachment and regular desiltation," says Divisional Forest Officer Anant Shankar, a part of the management committee.

Wetlands can be ranked amongst the most highly threatened ecosystems on Earth, but their degradation continues. The Union Budget 2023 saw a push towards 'green' growth with a focus on sustainable development and projects to mitigate the effects of climate change. In the Union Budget, Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman proposed that the Mangrove Initiative for Shoreline Habitat and Tangible Incomes will be taken up for mangrove plantation along the country's coastline and salt pan lands.

The move follows similar initiatives by other Asian countries such as Indonesia that has set a

target of rehabilitating six lakh hectares of mangroves by 2024. In India, Gujarat leads with 21.9% of the country's wetlands followed by Maharashtra (7.2%) and Andhra Pradesh (7.14%). While some of the major wetlands of Andhra Pradesh include wildlife sanctuaries like Coringa, Krishna, Kolleru, Nelapattu and Uppalapadu, the State also has many lesser-known and unprotected wetlands which need urgent intervention to stop further degradation.

An aerial view of Kondakarla Ava, a unique wetland near Visakhapatnam that is a home to over 150 bird species and also has a rich biodiversity like aquatic species and plants. | Photo Credit: KR Deepak

With an objective to engage with the public and generate citizen scientist data of the lake, the AP Forest Department has developed a comprehensive app to monitor Kondakarla. "We are at the testing stage and will be launching the app shortly. We plan to link the app to other platforms like eBird and iNaturalist where people can upload data," says Anant. The app will also help assess the wetland characteristics through Geographic Information System where basic parameters of the water can be gauged without manually collecting samples.

"The ecosystem is currently disturbed due to unregulated tourism activity and other factors. Through the app, our focus is to have baseline data since very little research has been done on the wetland ecosystem," he adds.

Smooth-coated otters | Photo Credit: Special Arrangement

Visitors enjoying a ride at Kondakarlava. | Photo Credit: KR Deepak

Coming back to the otters, the findings were significant, at a time when there have been recurring conflicts reported between the fishing community and the animals. "Otters feed on commercially farmed and valuable wild fish such as snakehead fish, and damage fish traps. Hence, the local fishing community tries to kill them. But otters are apex predators and have a valuable role to play to maintain the balance of the ecosystem," says Pranav. To mitigate the conflict, ECCT plans to put devices which get triggered if there is movement near the fish traps and in the process, scare the otters away. "We are currently looking for funds to start the pilot project," says Pranav. ECCT has been working closely with the fishing community around Kondakarlava to spread awareness about the importance of otters. In other wetlands of Andhra Pradesh in East Godavari and Krishna districts, there are no conflicts reported between smooth-coated otters and the locals.

A research study on the Kondakarlava lake was done a few years ago by Prof. K Kameswara Rao and NRP Varalakshmi of Dept. of Environmental Studies, Andhra University. The study highlighted a rich variety of phytoplankton (also known as microalgae that are the primary producers of the aquatic community) in the lake. Kondakarlava acts as the economic backbone of communities residing in the surrounding villages. The study stressed on the need to improve and maintain water quality by controlling pollution and a participatory management model to safeguard the ecosystem.

A purple moorhen at the Kondakarlava freshwater lake | Photo Credit: Special Arrangement

"Identifying and notifying wetlands is one way to safeguard them. To keep the natural characteristics intact, the inflow and outflow channels need to be cleared, water levels should be monitored and suitable endemic species need to be introduced," says Anant.

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,” adds Pranav.

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