

# WETLAND 'NATURE TOURISM' GETS A FILLIP

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Sixteen Ramsar sites, including Chilika lake, have been identified under the initiative, and five of them have been included in a pilot project for skill development. | Photo Credit: The Hindu

The Central government has embarked on a mission to promote tourism at ecologically-sensitive wetlands better known as Ramsar sites like Odisha's Chilika lake and Haryana's Sultanpur bird sanctuary. The focus would be to shift these fragile wetlands from high-value tourism to nature tourism by directly supporting conservation action and letting local communities and economies take the lead.

A Ramsar site is a wetland designated to be of international importance under an environmental treaty signed in February 1971 at Ramsar, Iran under the auspices of UNESCO. Ramsar identifies wetlands of international importance, especially those providing waterfowl habitat. It provides for national action and international cooperation regarding the conservation of wetlands, and wise sustainable use of their resources.

[India has 75 Ramsar sites](#). Odisha's Chilika Lake and Bhitarkarnika Mangroves, West Bengal's Sundarbans, Chitrangudi Bird Sanctuary in Tamil Nadu are some of the well-known Ramsar sites in India.

The initiative to develop these sites has been taken by the Union Tourism Ministry and the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change under the 'Amrit Dharohar Capacity Building Scheme' 2023.

The *Amrit Dharohar* initiative, part of the 2023-24 budget announcement, was launched during June 2023 to promote unique conservation values of the Ramsar Sites in the country while generating employment opportunities and supporting local livelihoods. The scheme is being implemented in convergence with various Central Government ministries and agencies, State wetland authorities, and a network of formal and informal institutions and individuals, working together for a common cause.

The aim is to enhance livelihood opportunities for local communities through harnessing the nature-tourism potential of the Ramsar Sites across the country.

The two ministries are training facilitators, tourism service providers, stakeholders for strengthening of nature tourism at Ramsar sites in association with the State Tourism Department. The focus is to shift the high-volume tourism at these fragile wetlands to high-value

nature tourism, directly supporting conservation action, local communities and economies.

The tourism industry identifies high-value travellers as those who are likely to spend more, stay longer, and disperse beyond tourist hotspots.

Nature tourism on the other hand is tourism based on the natural attractions of an area like birdwatching, photography, stargazing, camping, hiking, hunting, fishing, and visiting parks. These are experiential tourists who are interested in a diversity of natural and cultural resources.

“Wetlands are important for the conservation of global biological diversity and for sustaining human life through the maintenance of their ecosystem components, processes and services. Hence it is important that we focus on nature tourism at these Ramsar sites,” a senior tourism Ministry official told *The Hindu*.

As of now, 16 Ramsar sites have been identified out of which 5 have been taken up as a pilot project for skill development of the facilitators, tourism service providers, stakeholders in and around these sites.

These five wetlands are Sultanpur National Park (Haryana), Bhitarkanika Mangroves (Odisha), Chilika Lake (Odisha), Sirpur (Madhya Pradesh) and Yashwant Sagar (Madhya Pradesh).

A total of 30 participants have been trained at each of the Ramsar sites for 15 days each under the Alternative Livelihood Programme (ALP) at Sultanpur (Haryana), Yashwant Sagar and Sirpur (Madhya Pradesh).

At Bhitarkanika and Chilika in Odisha, two training programmes of 15 days each namely Alternative Livelihood Programme (ALP) and Paryatan Navik Certificate (boatman certification for tourism) will soon be completed. A total of 60 participants (30 for each course) is being trained at these sites.

“We are trying to train boatmen, local artisans as well as shopkeepers double up as guides who can explain the importance of these wetlands and the flora and fauna available there,” the tourism ministry said.

A special conference is also being organised in the first week of February in Indore to formulate SOPs and guidelines for the States and other stakeholders.

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