

PROTECTING THE SUNDARBAN WETLANDS

Relevant for: Environment | Topic: Environmental Conservation, Sustainable Development, and EIA

On January 30, the Indian Sundarban was accorded the status of 'Wetland of International Importance' under the Ramsar Convention. The Sundarbans comprises hundreds of islands and a network of rivers, tributaries and creeks in the delta of the Ganga and the Brahmaputra at the mouth of the Bay of Bengal in India and Bangladesh. Located on the southwestern part of the delta, the Indian Sundarban constitutes over 60% of the country's total mangrove forest area. It is the 27th Ramsar Site in India, and with an area of 4,23,000 hectares is now the largest protected wetland in the country.

The Convention on Wetlands of International Importance, better known as the Ramsar Convention, is an international agreement promoting the conservation and wise use of wetlands. It is the only global treaty to focus on a single ecosystem. The convention was adopted in the Iranian city of Ramsar in 1971 and came into force in 1975. Traditionally viewed as a wasteland or breeding ground of disease, wetlands actually provide freshwater and food, and serve as nature's shock absorber. Wetlands, critical for biodiversity, are disappearing rapidly, with recent estimates showing that 64% or more of the world's wetlands have vanished since 1900. Major changes in land use for agriculture and grazing, water diversion for dams and canals and infrastructure development are considered to be some of the main causes of loss and degradation of wetlands.

The Indian Sundarban met four of the nine criteria required for the status of 'Wetland of International Importance' — presence of rare species and threatened ecological communities, biological diversity, significant and representative fish and fish spawning ground and migration path. The Indian Sundarban, also a UNESCO world heritage site, is home to the Royal Bengal Tiger. The Ramsar website points out that the Indian Sundarban is also home to a large number of "rare and globally threatened species, such as the critically endangered northern river terrapin (*Batagur baska*), the endangered Irrawaddy dolphin (*Orcaella brevirostris*), and the vulnerable fishing cat (*Prionailurus viverrinus*)." Two of the world's four horseshoe crab species, and eight of India's 12 species of kingfisher are also found here. Recent studies claim that the Indian Sundarban is home to 2,626 faunal species and 90% of the country's mangrove varieties.

Environmentalists and forest officials say the Ramsar status will help to highlight conservation issues of the Sundarbans at the international level. The part of the Sundarban delta, which lies in Bangladesh, was accorded the status of a Ramsar site in 1992, and with Indian Sundarban getting it too, international cooperation between the two countries for the protection of this unique ecosystem will increase. This could lead to a better conservation strategy for flagship species such as the tiger and the northern river terrapin.

While the Indian Sundarban is a biodiverse preserve, over four million people live on its northern and northwestern periphery, putting pressure on the ecosystem. Concerns have been raised about natural ecosystems being changed for cultivation of shrimp, crab, molluscs and fish.

The Ramsar Information Sheet lists fishing and harvesting of aquatic resources as a "high impact" actual threat to the wetland. The other threats are from dredging, oil and gas drilling, logging and wood harvesting, hunting and collecting terrestrial animals. Salinity has been categorised as a medium and tourism as a low impact actual threat in the region. Experts believe that while the Ramsar status may bring in international recognition to the Indian Sundarban, the wetland, which along with anthropogenic pressures, is also vulnerable to climate change and requires better management and conservation practices.

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