

NGT SLAPS 10 CRORE PENALTY ON KERALA GOVERNMENT FOR FAILURE TO PROTECT RAMSAR SITES

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Indiscriminate waste dumping into the Kochi backwaters near the Marine Drive walkway continues, despite several studies that had warned that the ecosystem of the waterbody will be adversely affected in view of the unchecked pollution. Plastic bottles and other non degradable items choke the lifeline of the backwaters. | Photo Credit: H VIBHU

The Principal Bench of the National Green Tribunal in New Delhi has slapped a penalty of 10 crore on the Kerala government for its failure to check the indiscriminate pollution of the Vembanad and Ashtamudi lakes, listed as Ramsar sites.

The Bench, led by its chairperson Adarsh Kumar Goel, said in its order dated March 22 that the penalty imposed on the basis of the 'polluter pays principle' had to be deposited in a ring-fenced account to be operated under the authority of the Chief Secretary.

The deposit had to be made within a month, it said while disposing of a petition alleging failure of statutory and administrative authorities in taking remedial action for protection of the Vembanad and Ashtamudi lakes hit by illegal waste dumping.

The penalty of 10 crore had to be utilised for conservation/restoration measures by preparing an action plan to be preferably executed within six months. It would be open to the Chief Secretary to collect the amount from erring officers/ departments/ industries/ individuals in accordance with the law by an appropriate mechanism and hold erring officers appropriately accountable departmentally or by way of prosecution and also to proceed against other entities, railways, local bodies, and industries [responsible for the pollution] within three months, it said.

The Additional Chief Secretary, Department of Environment, had submitted a report before the tribunal stating that 1,176 notices had been issued by the local bodies concerned to the owners of flats, establishments, hotels, resorts, houseboats, and industrial units for dumping untreated wastewater into the waterbodies. A total of 1,939 illegal outlets into the canals/drains leading to the lakes had been closed. A total compensation of 1.7 crore had been imposed on the violators, it said.

The Bench said the report depicted the disappointing state of affairs in ensuring the mandatory

duty of protecting wetlands, which are Ramsar sites, in spite of binding orders of the Supreme Court in similar cases.

Action taken at the State level was also inadequate to remedy the situation. The State cannot plead helplessness in implementing guaranteed rights of the citizens and also in taking stringent measures for protection of environment and public health, it said.

Last week, the Bench imposed a penalty of 100 crore on the Kochi Corporation for its continuing neglect of duties, resulting in the crisis at its dump site at Brahmapuram following a major fire on March 2.

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