

WHY THE NEW REPORT ON WETLANDS MUST BE TREATED AS A RED FLAG

Relevant for: Environment & Disaster Management | Topic: Environmental Conservation, Sustainable Development & EIA

If there is one beautiful wetland that can be called the jewel of India's natural heritage, it is the Loktak Lake in Manipur. It is well known for phumdis (heterogeneous mass of vegetation) floating over it and the Keibul Lamjao National Park located on these phumdis is the only floating national park in the world, and home to the endangered Sangai and Manipur brown-antlered deer. That's not all: Loktak's rich biological diversity comprises 233 species of aquatic plants and 57 species of water birds. But today, development activities such as hydropower generation, irrigation and drinking water supply are destroying this lake.

Unfortunately, such destruction of wetlands is a worldwide phenomenon. According to the recently released 88-page report, Global Wetland Outlook (State of the World's Wetlands and their Services to People 2018), found that around 35% of wetlands — lakes, rivers, marshes, peatlands, as well as coastal and marine areas such as lagoons, mangroves, and coral reefs — were lost between 1970 and 2015. Today, wetlands cover more than 12 million square km, the report said, warning that the annual rates of loss had accelerated since 2000. "We are losing wetlands three times faster than forests," said Rojas Urrego, head of the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands.

This undervaluation of wetlands must stop. It is important that the Global Wetland Outlook report is treated as a red flag by all governments since they contribute to 75 Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) indicators. If we specifically take the urban sector, they help in flood control, help store excess rainwater, replenishing groundwater, supplying freshwater, playing host to a diverse assemblage of species, and providing cultural and aesthetic value. The 2015 flood in Chennai is just one example of what destruction of wetlands can lead to. Restoring natural infrastructure can help reduce disaster risk. The Netherlands, as part of the "Room for the River" initiative, restored natural floodplains of the Rivers Ijssel, Rhine, Lek and Waal, to reduce the impact of floods. In India, the Coringa Wildlife Project in Andhra Pradesh has revived mangroves, and, according to UNDP calculations, these mangroves have protected at least 75,000 people of Kakinada in seven villages from cyclones.

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