

Curb vested interests to save wetlands

Prashanth G N, Bangalore, April 12, 2014, DHNS:



The most prolific group working on wetlands in and around Bangalore is IISc ecologist Professor T V Ramachandra and his team of researchers.

"We've been studying the shapes and forms of the wetlands for 20 years. Every characteristic of lakes and wetlands in Bangalore has been mapped by us. But I am sorry to say that the technology city has suffered from depletion of wetlands over the last 20 years," says Prof Ramachandra.

As per their research, over 300 lakes/wetlands have disappeared in Bangalore's eco-system, with the City now having only 93. But seasonal lakes, lakes which come alive during monsoon are high in number at around 190.

"Wetlands are different from lakes, in that lakes would be the actual water body, while wetland would be all the soggy area and lands around the lake. The wet areas where weeds grow and where water is absorbed are all wetlands. At one point, we had almost all the lakes with extensive lands around them. The sixties and seventies saw a very exuberant green landscape dotted with water bodies. But by the nineties, the waterbody ecosystem completely changed," Ramachandra explains.

What has been the major factor causing disappearance of the lakes? The ecologist puts things in perspective: "Urbanisation is at the core of Bangalore's lake depletion. Too many buildings, construction of structures over lakes, encroaching wetland area around the lakes are responsible for the decline in lakes.

Typically wetlands are denotified by government agencies and passed on to builders who pay a hefty bribe in return for the land bought. This agency-builder nexus should be taken out if we have to ensure strict regulation of waterbodies."

There is also an opinion that orders on lake regulation by bureaucrats smack of ignorance of the ground situation. Says a researcher: "I have never seen bureaucrats visiting or inspecting lakes periodically. There is no long-term plan in place on how to preserve and protect the lake bio-diversity.

Of course, there is the Lake Development Authority (LDA), but how much authority does it really have in the face of other powerful government agencies that do away with the land? Environmentalists have not been able to deal with the land mafia.

A set of vested interests develop around a lake and at the right time, things move in the government to denotify areas and money is exchanged liberally. The committees that have bureaucrats must also have credible ecologists and environmentalists, thinkers and credible urban planners."

Groundwater in Bangalore has been taking a hit for some time now. Researchers have pointed out that many groundwater areas have gone dry in and around Bangalore. All Bangalore residents don't have access to water from the Cauvery river.

So there is heavy dependence on borewells and underground water. In many areas, it is common to see women collecting water from taps and pipes in a corner or from a public borewell facility.

This shortage could have been mitigated to an extent by expanding and preserving the water bodies around Bangalore. While it would not solve water problems on a huge scale, there could be a case for water body rejuvenation via water regulation.

Social researchers fear that water shortage will lead to conflicts and everyday fighting among residents of particular districts or regions.

"Water wars are not impossible to anticipate in the near future. There is already a difference of opinion on water sharing between the states of Karnataka and Tamil Nadu who depend on the Cauvery river - southern India's lifeline.

From urban residents, both rich and poor, to farmers in the agrarian regions, Cauvery is vital for survival. In such a context, drawing water from other reservoirs would help.

Experts say water bodies close to the T G Halli reservoir (which also supplies water to the city), at the border of Western Bangalore, need to be protected to rejuvenate underground water. Unfortunately, industries were given permission to operate from around the area. But a sustained campaign against industrial presence has resulted in positive changes.

The National Green Tribunal (NGT) asked nearly a dozen industrial units to shut shop from areas close to the reservoir, called Zone-3. The Tribunal also ordered that units vacate from Zone-4, stating that there can be no justification for granite cutting and polishing units around the reservoir.

Chemicals were dumped on the river bed and into the reservoir and canals. Anti-pollution activists are reasonably happy that orders were given to factories to relocate. Hopefully things will get brighter as awareness picks up on the need to protect and preserve precious water bodies in and around Bangalore. "We would be very happy to share our studies on wetlands to help in their preservation," says Ramachandra.

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