

RULES WILL DILUTE WETLAND PRESERVATION

By Preethi Ravi, Bangalore Mirror Bureau | Jun 8, 2016, 04.00 AM IST



Terminology ambiguous, experts say; but there is a ray of hope because they also say power to state would be advantageous

The draft wetlands conservation and management rules, 2016, which will replace the Wetland (Conservation and Management) Rules of 2010, have come under severe criticism by Bengaluru-based ecologists. They point out that the terminology of wetlands in itself is ambiguous. If the current 2016 draft rules are to be implemented, they

would jeopardise the country's wetland conservation, they say.

However, the ecologists do feel that the power it will entrust states with to conserve and protect wetlands will be advantageous. This includes deciding which wetlands should be protected and what activities should be allowed or regulated, while making the right decision of sustainability and ecosystem services.

According to TV Ramachandra, professor at the Centre for Ecological Sciences, IISc, the fact that the states will have the authority to decide on the conservation and activities involved in wetlands is a good move. In the 2010 draft, the Central Wetlands Regulatory Authority monitored wetlands with most of its focus on Ramsar - the international treaty on conservation and sustainable use of wetlands - leaving out lakes in many states including Karnataka.

"While in the 2010 draft, the states were asked to identify wetlands, that was not done. Now a separate authority to ensure that wetlands are preserved will bring decentralisation. But making rules is not enough; implementing them is crucial," he said.

Talking about the status of wetlands in the city, Ramachandra said, "It is pathetic. Nearly 98 per cent of our wetlands are encroached upon. This encroachment is a worrying sign as far as Bengaluru is concerned."

On the other hand, Ashoka Trust for Research in Ecology and the Environment has appealed to the ministry of environment, forest and climate change not to proceed with the draft wetland rules, 2016, and to take steps to ameliorate the existing wetland rules, 2010 instead.

In a letter, they stated that these draft rules are inept and the process is Sisyphean. The new drafts are very brief, ambiguous and do not suggest any particular measures for the conservation of wetlands in the country. It is rather weak or not substantial, according to Priyadarsanan Dharma Rajan, senior fellow with ATREE.



The definition of wetlands is misleading, adds Ramachandra. "The proposed rules exclude rivers and paddy fields. For wetlands to exist, there have to be ponds, rivers, lakes and paddy fields. There has to be strict implementation of restriction of activities in wetlands. We need to conserve wetlands even before they are polluted."

Though the structure of proposed wetland are heavy with the membership of almost a dozen departmental secretaries, the new rules do not provide any power to the authorities for effective conservation and management of wetlands, according to Rajan.

"The role of proposed authorities are restricted to conducting inventories of wetlands, preparing management plans and coordinating with 'line departments' for the implementation of management plans.

The process of 'inventorying in preparation of management plans' could be a Sisyphean exercise that demands plenty of resources, trained manpower and expertise. Though majority Ramsar sites were designated more than a decade back, except for Chilka, no management plan could be prepared for any Ramsar sites till date," he added.

ABUSE OF WETLANDS

According to a study conducted by IISc last year titled Wetlands Treasure of Bangalore says that wetlands have been abused (with encroachments by mafia), polluted (sustained inflow of untreated sewage and industrial effluents, dumping of solid wastes and building debris) highlights the lack of (i) sense of belonging of all stakeholders, (ii) sincerity (bureaucracy and decision makers) and (iii) implementation of regulatory norms (weak governance). An exploratory field survey of 105 lakes in Bangalore was conducted during 2013. Of these, 25 lakes were fully covered with macrophytes.

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