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## Ports destroying state's mangrove cover: Study

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GANDHINAGAR: Unplanned development of ports, jetties, refineries, salt works, cement industries and thermal plants along the state's 1,650 kilometre sea coast may result in swift degradation of the mangrove cover and steps need to be taken urgently for protection from disasters like cyclone and tsunami.

This Gujarat government study, conducted by forest official H S Singh on behalf of the state forest department, cautions that unfettered development have a 'negative impact' on sustainable yield of prawn and fish, too.

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Called 'Mangroves and their Environment', the study provides data suggesting how the mangrove cover in Gujarat has come down from 991 sq km in 1995 to 960 sq km within a decade.

The study blames mangrove loss on the policy of massive port development since 1995. It regrets that despite the danger, the state has planned six ports in the private sector and another four in the joint sector.

Significantly, the study also blames dams across rivers for the loss of mangrove. "Ecological conditions of estuaries of major and minor rivers have changed due to construction of a series of irrigation dams across the rivers.

Except rivers in south Gujarat, discharge of regular rainwater during the normal monsoon is found to be inadequate." As a result of this, "quality and diversity of mangroves have gone down in the Gulf of Kutch because flow of fresh water has become almost negligible in normal monsoon."

The situation is similar in other parts of Gujarat. "Majority of mangrove areas are turning saline due to reduction in fresh water flow in the rivers. This has had a negative impact on the mangrove area and also the species diversity."

The study points to how oil spills in the Gulf of Kutch has caused damage to young plants. "Between Jakhau and Navlakhi, the Kandla Port Trust has taken over a big chunk of mangrove tract.

It is expected that 84 million tonnes of crude oil will be imported in the Gulf of Kutch by 2007. This will increase minor and major oil spills in the region."

The oil terminal at Vadinar and cement, chemical, fertiliser, refinery and thermal power plants at Sikka have accelerated the degradation, the report says.

Discharge of chemicals and other pollutants from industries and ship-breaking at Alang continue to destroy mangroves in the Gulf of Khambhat and along Bhavnagar and Jafrabad.

"Yet, the government in 2003 put off a Canadian plan to afforest mangroves along the Gulf," the study notes. Land for afforestation was denied on the ground that the Kalpasar project was to be implemented.

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