

World Wetlands Day 2007 celebration in the Indian Himalayan Region

CEE Himalaya, an initiative of the Centre for Environment Education (CEE), observed the World Wetlands Day 2007 in two Indian Himalayan states – Jammu & Kashmir and Uttarakhand. Details of celebrations are being provided in the following sections.

World Wetlands Day 2007 in Uttarakhand

CEE Himalaya collaborated with G.B. Pant Institute of Himalayan Environment & Development (GBPIHED) and Uttarakhand Lakes Development Authority organized a 1-day programme on 2 February 2007 at Vikas Bhawan, Bhimtal in Uttarakhand. Bhimtal is surrounded by many lakes like Bhim Tal, Talli Tal, Malli Tal, Naukuchia Tal, Sat Tal, Nal Damyanti etc. and therefore a very suitable site for celebrating World Wetland Day. Representatives from Lakes Development Authority, local NGOs, teachers, students, village Sarpanchs, panchayat members and representatives and concerned citizens attended the programme.

Dr. B.P. Kothyari of GBPIHED extended a welcome to the participants and Dr. R.C. Sundriyal provided details of the community development and natural resources regeneration project being implementing by the same institute in Bhimtal area in 6 Van Panchayats. Dr. Abdhesh Gangwar of CEE talked about the history and importance of World Wetlands Day. Mr. Shivpuri an environmentalist was the Chairperson and Dr. P.C. Mahanta, Director, National Research Centre on Cold Water Fisheries of Indian Council of Agricultural Research (ICAR) at Bhimtal was the guest of honor on the occasion. Dr. Mahanta gave the keynote presentation on the prospects of cold water fisheries in India especially the mountain areas.



The Indian Ichthyofauna enlists about 2165 species, one of the richest resources consisting 11% of the world fish germplasm. Fishes are declining in the areas of their natural abundance some are at the verge of extinction due to various anthropogenic stresses. There is a strong necessity to evolve suitable conservation measures to check this declining trend.

In India a total of 327 fish species have been evaluated, of which 18 are data deficient; 13 fall under 'lower risk-least concern' category; 67 under 'lower risk-near threatened' category; 82 vulnerable and 98 endangered; 47 critically endangered; 1 extinct in the wild and 1 extinct. Coldwater fishery resources present diversified fish fauna in different hill regions comprising about 258 fish species from Indian uplands of which 203 are recorded from the Himalayas while 91 form Deccan plateau. The coldwater fisheries play an important role in the socio-economic life of the people dwelling in the mountainous zones of the country.

“Wetlands” are the areas which are neither fully terrestrial nor fully aquatic. In India these vary from the majestic Wullar Lake of Kashmir, Chilka of Orissa or Loktak of Manipur to shallow & unimpressive depressions which may hold water may be only for a few weeks in a year. Wetlands purify water and therefore are described as “the kidneys of the landscape”. They are also described as “biological supermarkets” because of their natural resources.

Wetlands are important source of fish. Global catch from inland fisheries was 9.2 million metric tons in 2004. Inland capture fisheries are a lifeline in many countries as a source of income and an immediate protein supply for local people. Aquaculture and inland capture fisheries provide valuable nutrition to many of the 26 landlocked countries that are considered low-income-food-deficit countries.

The future for wetlands is in the hands of all people, not just those who hold the power at government level. Everyone must take responsibility for the state of the environment. As we move towards the 21st century, it remains to be seen whether the current efforts to bring ordinary people into the mainstream of wetland conservation can play a significant role in rescuing the world's wetlands from the ravages of human mismanagement.



The participants also shared their concerns during the day.

World Wetlands Day 2007 in Kashmir

Another celebration was held at Sopore town near the famous Wular Lake in the Kashmir valley, considered to be the largest freshwater lake of Asia. Wular Lake has been designated as Ramsar site the “Wetland of International Importance” by Government of India. The Lake is fed by snow and rain fed streams, rivulets and rivers originating from the great Himalayas on the eastern edge of the Kashmir Valley and the Pir Panjal range extending along the south western parts. River Jehlum is another important source of Wular. The Wular Lake is presently under increasing pressure from over exploitation of its resources, conversion to other land uses through drainage engineering schemes, fertile farmland or buried under refuse tips, pollution and degradation of catchments.



The objective of celebration was to sensitize the local fishermen about the importance of the wetlands for the lives of humans in general and about the Wular Lake in particular. The thrust was on the conservation and wise use of wetlands towards achieving sustainable development.

About 80 fishermen from Sopore area who fish in Wular Lake and earn their livelihood from it attended the event. They were apprised of the importance of wetlands both for their goods and services. They were also briefed about various threats to wetlands and the corrective measures required. The participants also raised their concerns during the programme.



Wular Lake once was considered largest lake in Asia with an area of 200 sq km about 100 years ago which now is estimated only to 24 sq km. Local people directly depend on it for fish, fodder, variety of fruits and vegetables etc. It contributes to the State and National economy. Fish population has decreased because of pollution, over fishing and degradation of water quality. Many native fish species have become extinct and only one variety of fish is now found in the Lake.

Various human activities leading to wetland degradation and loss includes drainage, dredging and stream channelization, deposition of fill material, diking and damming, tilling for crop production, levees, logging, mining, construction, runoff, air and water pollutants, changing nutrient levels, releasing toxic chemicals, introducing innovative species and grazing by domestic animals were discussed. The natural threats to the wetland loss and degradation are erosion, subsidence, sea level rise, droughts, hurricanes and other storms.

Some of the preventive measures suggested to the fishermen include:

- Fishing of small size fishes should be avoided to let them grow bigger and have a sustainable fishery.
- Extraction of fodder from the Lake should be controlled.
- Proper solid waste management should be implemented.

Some important concerns that were raised by the participant fishermen community are:

- Government should not issue fresh licenses for fishing
- People from fishermen community should be employed in Fisheries Department
- New fish catching technologies should be provided and improved fish seed should be introduced
- Subsidies should be given on timber for making boats
- Fishermen community being poor should be given concessions and subsidies
- Lake should be dug up to increase depth for holding extra water and check against drying up