



East Kolkata Wetlands Management Authority

**On the Occasion of
WORLD WETLANDS DAY
2nd February, 2012**

World Wetlands Day is celebrated internationally each year on 2 February. It marks the anniversary of the signing of the Convention on Wetlands of International Importance (Ramsar Convention). Every year a theme is initiated on the background of this day. The theme for 2012 was wetlands and tourism.

The East Kolkata Wetlands Management Authority (*hereinafter* the Authority) has been entrusted with the duty to conserve and protect the East Kolkata Wetlands and it celebrates World Wetlands Day every year to raise public awareness about the ecological importance of the East Kolkata Wetlands. This year on this event, the Authority arranged a meeting at the Nuner Bheri No. 2 Matshyajibi Samabay Samity (*A Fish Producers Co-operative Society*). The location was chosen within the wetlands so that the local stakeholders could be enlightened and educated on issues pertaining to these wetlands. Mr. Arijit Banerjee, Chief Technical Officer (EKWMA), Mr. Alak Haldar, Chief Administrative Officer, Institute of Environmental studies and Wetland Management (IESWM), Mr. Somenath Bhattacharyya, Senior Scientist, (IESWM), Mr. Tushar Ghosh, Member (EKWMA), Mr. Sasi Dulal Ghosh, Member (EKWMA), staff of EKWMA and representatives from different co-operatives situated within the EKW area also attended and participated in the celebration. There was an open discussion on the critical issues and possible solutions which was chaired by Mr. Tushar Ghosh.

Some of the major issues which were highlighted during the meeting and which require immediate attention have been highlighted below:-

- There is urgent need to create more awareness among people and to educate them about the unique resource recovery system provided by these wetlands.
- The East Kolkata Wetlands act as strainer which purifies sewage water naturally. The same water is used in biomass production like fisheries, agriculture and horticulture. Kolkata city has no formal sewage treatment system. The Wetlands (Conservation and Management) Rules, 2010 put restrictions on the inflow of sewage in the Ramsar Sites. But EKW survive on the basis of this sewage water so there is a need to modify the Rules accordingly.
- In the surrounding region, there are seventeen depots of fish traders which are directly dependant on the EKW fisheries. Thus, wise use of these resources is important.
- A major portion of East Kolkata Wetlands are within 8kms from the Eastern Metropolitan Bypass. This situation gives rise to a constant pressure for urbanisation. So, to protect the wetlands from being prey to business developers support from local communities is necessary.

- The wetlands receive 30% to 35% of sewage water from KMC and the rest flows by Dry Weather Flow Canal to Kulti. If the amount of sewage water can be increased through Bantala Lock Gate EKW's should get more sewage water to encourage sewage fed pisciculture and other activities.
- Also there should be unique distribution of sewage water in the EKW area. There are 49 'Khal (canal) Committees' in this area. Capacity Building of the Khal Committees should be focused on.
- The depth of the bheries (fisheries pond) varies between 2ft to 8ft. However, the minimum level optimum for fish production is 4ft to 5ft so there is a need to de-silt some bheries in order to obtain optimum outcome of the de-siltation programme. Also those engaged in fish production should be allowed to have a greater share and facilities should be made for storage of fishes.
- Representatives from different Bheries also shared some common problems. The most important concern is to protect the wetlands from unlawful encroachment. It is necessary to protect and preserve the land in its original character. NREGS (National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme) provides a unique opportunity to rejuvenate the fisheries which have silted up. In the absence of clear titles of land, fishermen have no access to credit from Banks which is also a major hindrance.

Vision of Chief Technical Officer (CTO)

In the beginning Mr. Arijit Banerjee, the Chief Technical Officer thanked everyone for being present at the celebration of World Wetlands Day. He stated that for the last couple of years the Authority has been proactive in taking prompt action against any activity that represents a threat to wetlands. However, it was possible largely because of the co-operation from the local stakeholders as well as administrative authorities.

Considering the theme for 2012 he agreed that it is important to consider tourism activities in wetlands since tourism can contribute to local economies, conservation activities and awareness generation. Ecotourism is one of the possible mechanisms to achieve these objectives but instead of focusing on the contributions of spas, bars, restaurants etc. ecotourism should focus on birding sites, home stays, trekking, walking trails, and sites of scenic beauty, parks and open spaces.

He stated with regret that being a peri-urban wetland, East Kolkata Wetlands has always been under a constant threat of encroachment. If urbanization is continued to be allowed on wetland it will result in fragmentation of wetlands leading to habitat and biodiversity loss. The Authority struggles to prevent such encroachment, became apparent towards the end of the last year when an illegal attempt of change of the land character of a plot of land situated at RS Dag no 658,

Mouza-Nonadanga, JL no-10, PS-Tiljala, Dist. South 24 Parganas (KMC Ward No. 108) by constructing a boundary wall was brought down by a successful demolition at 21st January, 2012.

According to him there are certain other issues which also require attention. One of these is the necessity of undertaking massive plantation throughout the year within the wetlands. Absence of electricity also in some areas within the wetlands is a major drawback which has to be addressed at the earliest hour. Connectivity in this region has to be improved by constructing roads. In case of Bheri and canal de-siltation, the silt can be moved to the nearby townships. For this arrangements can be made for trucks to carry silt during the night. Discussions were made to the appropriate authority about the maintenance of the inflow of sewage water in this region.

The East Kolkata Wetlands is the pride and honour of the city of Kolkata. It is our duty to preserve and protect these wetlands which not only are ecologically important but also carry cultural significance for us. The Authority on this auspicious day requests the people of Kolkata to extend their helping hand and co-operate with us to protect these wetlands.

The celebration ended with a vote of thanks by Mr. Tushar Ghosh to everybody present at the venue and an appeal to everyone to preserve and protect the East Kolkata Wetlands which offer the people of Kolkata an array of “ecosystem services”. These wetlands are a habitat for several endangered species and it is everybody’s responsibility to save them from any threat so that the coming generations can witness the unique ecosystem that exists here.