

## **Ramsar Convention on Wetlands: 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Celebrations in Kashmir, India**



Day long celebration was organised by the Centre for Environment Education (CEE) with support from Welthungerhilfe on the occasion of 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Ramsar Convention at a village called Kulhama situated on the banks of Wular Lake, the Ramsar site in Indian Himalayan state of Jammu and Kashmir. Community representatives, Fishermen, Scientists, Foresters and Educators from CEE participated in the event that was a mix of awareness-raising talks, voices of the villagers, discussions, recommendations followed by a rally.

To begin with CEE representative apprised the participants about the special importance of World Wetlands Day 2011 to commemorate 40 years of Ramsar Convention. Linking the theme 'WETLANDS AND FORESTS' he mentioned about the launch of 'International Year of Forests 2011' on the same day and the importance of forests for the health of wetlands. Participants were told about various forested wetlands like mangroves, peat swamp forests, freshwater swamp forests etc, which are different biologically but significant for managing our freshwater stocks and provide with many other ecological services including acting as 'carbon sinks'.

Speaking about the need for protection and saving forests, the local Forest Officer explained to the villagers how to keep lake pollution levels low. He further said the health of our wetlands, whether forested or not, is linked to the health of forests in our catchments. Losing and degrading forests means losing and degrading wetlands.

Inspector local Fisheries Department reminded that Wular once considered largest lake in Asia, has reduced to a depth of only 6 meters and the area has reduced from 200 sq km to only 24 sq km. Highlighting the importance of the lake he further emphasised that local people directly depend on the lake for fish, fodder, vegetables etc. and it

contributes to the State and National economy. Unfortunately the fish population is constantly decreasing due to pollution, overfishing and lack of water quality control. He called upon the local people to play their role in conservation and rebuilding of the lake and avoiding deforestation to stop subsequent soil erosion and sedimentation. Lake should be protected from direct disposal of untreated sewage and solid waste. He called for stopping fishing small size fish to improve the fish population.

Speaking on the occasion the village headman expressed concern about silting and pollution in lake due to uncontrolled inflow of non- biodegradable waste and sewage. He also expressed worry about the lower yields of aquatic species used as vegetables. The lake is known for extensive marshes of emergent and floating vegetation, particularly water chestnut, that provide an important source of revenue. Local school teacher appealed that large nets should be banned from the wetland area. Another office bearer of village government raised the issue of low fish production affecting the livelihoods as majority of village population is dependent on fishing from the lake. Their agony is that the population is increasing whereas Wular Lake is towards decline affecting the livelihoods of many.

At the end of the day participants numbering around 150 took out a rally carrying placards and shouting slogans - 'save wetlands' and 'save forests'. The rally went throughout the village involving other people as well. Amongst the participants were the members of village disaster management committees from nearby villages. CEE is instrumental in community based disaster preparedness in 50 villages from Kashmir. This includes awareness-raising about natural disasters and their relationship with health of surrounding ecosystems, preparing village level contingency plans, popularizing alternate livelihoods that help reduce pressure on local resources. Village disaster management committees of 8-10 members including youth, teachers and other active villagers are responsible to respond to any kind of disasters happening in and around these villages as well as to motivate community towards conservation and wise use of local resources.

Wular Lake, the largest fresh water lake in India situated in the lap of high mountains towards the north-eastern side is home to several migratory and resident birds and above fifty aquatic animal species. The catchment area has coniferous forests, alpine pastures and orchards. An artificial island has added value to lake as a favourite picnic spot. There is urgent need to intensify the efforts by lake managers to revive the Lake taking measures like disinflation, deepening, afforestation in the catchment area, stopping untreated sewage influx, regulated and guided fishing and through community awareness and participation in the maintenance of high quality of water. CEE Himalaya had earlier organised awareness programme for the fisherman community of Wular Lake on the occasion of WWD 2007.