



## Raising Awareness and Motivation towards Conservation of High Altitude Wetlands in Uri, Jammu and Kashmir, India

Centre for Environment Education (CEE) celebrated the World Wetlands Day 2009 with the students from seven schools including one private school from Salamabad and nearby areas. The day long awareness programme attended by 110 students (standards 1 to 8), teachers and some parents was held at Government Primary School Salamabad, Uri. This school damaged in 2005 earthquake, is reconstructed as Anandshala (joy of learning) under building earthquake resistant schools initiative of CEE's rehabilitation programme in the area.

Participants were apprised of history and importance of observing World Wetlands Day and the Ramsar Convention. Explaining this year's theme 'Wetland and River Basin Management', it was discussed how our lives are intricately woven around wetlands, whether we are upstream or downstream. Wetlands are getting encroached and polluted with the changing attitudes and increasing demands of development. High Altitude Wetlands are exposed to added threats due to the climate change impact. Dying Manasbal, one of the deepest lake in the Kashmir Valley is an example of human apathy towards wetlands. "We need to be more caring towards the wetlands, all of us, whether we are near the source or at the mouth since the same water flows through valleys and down to the plains" was the opinion expressed by one of the resource persons on this occasion.

Students were told about the Water Cycle and Wetland Management. Melting of glaciers due to sun rays is a natural phenomenon occurring through thousands of years providing water to the rivers and streams. Later some of this water gets evaporated and forms clouds which lead to snowfall in mountains and high valleys and rain in the plains. This is how the water cycle operates and is responsible for origin of wetlands.

The fact that earth is full of water yet so short of potable water because most of it is salty (97 per cent) and only 3 per cent is available as freshwater. Out of this 3 per cent about 0.08 per cent is available in the form of streams, lakes and rivers. The rest is stored in the form of Polar ice caps. This was explained to children with an example of a one litre mug full of water representing the entire water on earth and few drops falling from our finger after dipping it in mug equivalent to the fresh water for drinking and other human use.

The ecosystem service of wetlands in maintaining water supply, biodiversity and habitat, as sink to CO<sub>2</sub> and other GHGs, aesthetic and cultural values etc. must be fully recognised. The future

of wetlands depends on an integrated conservation, development and management of wetlands/river basins by all stakeholders (the government, the local and the scientific community, the tourists).

Students also got opportunity to express their opinion on wetlands and their importance through a 3 minute speech competition. A Quiz was conducted to create awareness on wetlands and especially in the local context. There was active participation from the kids and everyone was eager to answer the questions. Children also participated in a drawing competition on this occasion. The winners were given prizes to encourage them.

Some of the students came on the stage to give their feedback during the prize distribution ceremony. Master Kafeel of standard 6 from Salamabad Anandshala, the winner of speech competition mentioned “I have learned so many new things about wetlands and their management”! Ms Manpreet of Army Goodwill School considered conserving the wetlands important as they are the lifeline for all of us. Ms Afreen of Govt High School, Bijhama pledged that this is we who can make the difference and it is now or never. Children listed the local wetlands in and around Salamabad village.

The host village is close to river Jehlem and there are some local streams around the village. According to the villagers two third of Kashmir’s wetlands have been vanished during past 50 years. Jehlem, the main river in Baramulla district is plagued by massive silting and encroachment decreasing its flow to almost half of the original area. “Five decades before water level in major wetlands like lakes and rivers of this area was over 10 feet whereas now the depth is not more 2.5 feet” says G.H. Mohammed Mir 65, a retired wildlife guard from Salamabad village. He blames the government mechanism for ignoring the wetlands. Some villagers opined that large scale hydro power projects (Project Uri I and Uri II constructed by National Hydro Power Corporation) being set up on river Jehlem not only affect the quality of water but also the quantity and flow of water. They agreed that the deforestation in the area is responsible for siltation and erosion of the river banks.

Every year during the month of December there used to be at least 5-7 feet snow in the area, however, this year there has been just 6 inches of snow. This is dangerous as good snowfall ensures year round supply of water for drinking, irrigation, electricity, industry and other purposes. Symptoms of climate change are visible and all this behaviour may be attributed to climate change.

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