

VIII.2.A.2. Policies for Use and Management of Wetlands in West Bengal

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For ages the wetlands of the State had generated various types of economic benefits, such as various types of fishes which had been a source of food not only to the villagers but also for urban population. Fish rearing has also been done in wetlands under either as leased in or private holding basis. Adjoining to urban areas, such as around Calcutta surplus vested low land distributed after enactment of land reforms act has been converted to wetlands with the help of local panchayats and financial institutions for cultivation of fish. Urban and industrial waste water mainly supplied from drainage channels which is rich in nutrients (except some heavy metals) has been the source. This scheme basically serves as a giant biological treatment plant for organically contaminated garbage and waste water. Some of these wetlands has been also developed for recreation and had been a sanctuary for migratory birds on seasonal basis. The low lying ditched along railway lines has been used for irrigation and for growing 'Singara' crop. The common ponds/tanks in villages has been used widely as a source of drinking water, irrigation of crops and pisciculture. In Sundarbans (i.w. deltaic part of west Bengal) low lying areas adjoining to rivers have been converted to wetlands for prawn cultivation. Prawn cultivation polluted adjoining field crops mainly paddy.

In spite of capable of generating reasonable economic returns in comparison to forests, for ages development and protection as common property, these wetlands had not been taken into account. By filling up, a significant part of the wetlands has been converted to ordinary land for housing, causing serious ecological and environmental imbalances. For example, the entire Salt Lake area of Calcutta was once a big land being converted to a modern housing estate. Recently, housing complexes are also coming up along Bhagirathi-Matla river basin posing serious threat to ecology and biodiversity. If such urbanisation, silation of drainage canal are allowed to continue then livelihood from wetlands would suffer and also pose a serious environmental pollution threat to urban Calcutta. But it has been curtailed to some extent, by the hue and cry raised by some social activities environmental protection groups and also direction from courts. The government has formulated some policy for use of wetlands but it is yet to treat is as a common property resource like forests for protection, generation and distribution of resources among the villagers/beneficiaries.