

General Studies-3; Topic: Conservation

Protecting India's Wetlands

1) Introduction

- Wetlands are defined as: "lands transitional between terrestrial and aquatic eco-systems where the water table is usually at or near the surface or the land is covered by shallow water".
- India has a wealth of wetland ecosystems distributed in different geographical regions.
- As they support a variety of plant and animal life, biologically they are one of the most productive ecosystems.

2) Importance

- Wetlands are important, both economically and ecologically; providing food, water, livelihood, fisheries, birdlife, controlling floods, and acting as a natural filter for groundwater.
- Significant socio-economic values include constant water supply, fuelwood, medicinal plants, agriculture, energy resource, wildlife resource, transport, recreation and tourism.
- Wetlands are also important as a genetic reservoir for various species of plants including rice.

3) Threats to wetlands

- The world has already lost 35% of its wetlands since 1970.
- We lose wetlands three times faster than forests.
- India has nearly 30,000 wetlands of which we are losing 2-3% each year.
- The Punjab State Administration was recently pulled up by the courts for allowing illegal construction near the Harike Wetlands, a designated Ramsar Site.
- In the latest census, Ernakulam district in Kerala saw a drop of 37% in waterbirds as its wetlands face continued threats from road construction and waste dumping.
- There is no National Wetland Policy, which is a requirement under the Ramsar treaty obligation by India.
- Several water bodies of Delhi NCR have either been encroached upon or turned into garbage dumps.
- Most of the wetlands in the urban areas are under threat.
- The loss of wetlands leads to environmental and ecological problems, which have a direct impact on the socio-economic benefits of the associated populace.
- Climate change and sea level rise could also affect wetlands.

4) Conservation of wetlands

- Showing an early commitment to protecting wetlands, India became one of the first signatories to the Ramsar Convention in 1981.
- The good work in Chilika continues and today it is the largest wintering ground for migratory birds on the subcontinent.
- The Indian government has been updating Ramsar Sites Information Service (RSIS), an international resource guide and information database for Ramsar wetlands globally.
- Through this searchable database, one can track spatial boundary, management plans and up-to-date information on any wetland of importance.
- India has also identified 115 sites as wetlands of national importance so far, and the maintenance of these sites is funded through the MoEFCC.

- National Wetland Conservation Programme (NWCP), a MoEFCC scheme under which funds are allocated to wetland site management, and asking the states to identify wetlands of importance in their state for such management.

5) Wetlands (Conservation and Management) Rules, 2017

- In September 2017, India adopted the Wetlands (Conservation and Management) Rules, 2017.
- It prohibits conversion of wetland for non-wetland uses, setting up of industries near wetlands, and waste dumping into the water.
- The Wetlands Rules 2017 require setting up of a State Wetlands Authority in each state and union territory to monitor the notified wetlands in their state.
- This is a move in the right direction.

6) Way Forward

- With the level of urbanisation likely to increase from 30% to 50% in the next decade, a legal framework to protect these wetlands and their catchments are urgently needed
- There is enough evidence, both internationally and at home, that involving citizens, especially those who live near wetlands—is a good way to achieve conservation success.
- This helped in reviving the Mangalajodi Wetland located at the northern edge of Chilika.
- Focussing on directing CSR funds towards protecting wetlands could also be useful.
- NGOs, activists, conservationists and advocacy experts have a huge role to play in the conservation of wetlands and the government needs to work closely with them with international best practices.
- The database of wetlands in India is not complete and money needs to be invested in groundwork and diligent survey of wetland areas across the country.
- In the absence of information on the wetland boundaries, it is often difficult to control the encroachment on wetlands.
- It is therefore necessary to notify the wetlands, clearly demarcating the wetland boundary and zone of influence of the wetlands.
- The Government of India should enact a wetland conservation act, on the lines of the Forest Conservation Act, 1980.
- The government ought to become a facilitator, while society should become caretaker of wetlands.

7) Facts for Prelims

- The Ramsar Convention came into force in 1975 as an intergovernmental treaty that aims to promote conservation and wise use of wetlands.
- Today, we have 27 Ramsar Sites in the country. Sundarban Wetland was designated on 1 February 2019
- Ramsar is the only convention of its type that focuses on a particular type of ecosystem.
- Montreux Record under the Convention is a register of wetland sites on the List of Wetlands of International Importance where changes in ecological character have occurred, are occurring, or are likely to occur as a result of technological developments, pollution or other human interference.
- The coastal wetlands are largely dominated by mangrove vegetation.
- Wetlands in southern peninsular India are mostly manmade and are known as yeris (tanks).