

Biodiversity conversation

Dhrubajyoti Ghosh believes that sustainable use should not be in-different to the basic rights of the people living in the fragile ecosystems in a brainstorming with British wetlands management experts

CALCUTTA'S wetlands are the latest hotspot in today's biodiversity scenario, but not perhaps for the right reasons. They are, of course, precious to Calcutta, not only because they treat Calcutta's sewage but because they represent a wealth of traditional science and have much to teach the modern world on conservation and utilization, on how to create a tangible urban facility and defend it against the onslaught of real-estate interests.

Small wonder, therefore, that national and international experts have started to take note of Calcutta's success stories and even find time to study them. The thanks are entirely due to those farmers and fish producers whose creative abilities have given the Calcutta wetlands pride of place. In fact, the Indo-British workshop

on biodiversity held in Calcutta, with specific focus on the wetlands ecosystem in the second week of February, was perhaps inspired by Calcutta's unique experience. Two other workshops were simultaneously held in Bangalore and Jodhpur relating specifically to forests and arid deserts.

Whatever may have been the quality of local participation, the presence of the three British specialists, Michael Walkey, Alan Hildrew and Cluris Newbold added an additional dimension to the proceedings. This despite the fact that none of them had been exposed to wetlands issues of this country. Therefore, they had as much to learn from India as the Indians from them. Significantly, informal dialogue with them began even before the formal inauguration of the biodiversity convention.

With sustainable use as the focus — as in any discussion on wetlands — Calcutta or elsewhere, the deliberations were on the role of Ramsar, an intergovernmental bureau for setting out strategies on wetlands management. The changed perception of wetlands management even in the Ramsar Convention was acknowledged, with the new focus on the significance of sustainable use almost abandoning its narrower legacy of waterfowl preservation.

But there was also the realization that Ramsar, set up in 1971, has not been as effective as it was expected to have been in projecting the cause of wetlands conservation, though the tropical forest movement has gained strength within a shorter time. Significantly, the Rio conference hardly featured programmes on

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wetlands conservation. It was clear that wetlands conservation hadn't yet become a movement that arouses the interest of the common people.

The British specialists visited the Bhitarkanika ecosystem and the Chilka lake in Orissa. There was doubt that the interest of the poor, who drew sustenance from such wetland ecosystems, should be given first priority. It is no fault of theirs that a large number of people are forced to thrive on such ecosystems like Sunderban mangroves or Bhitarkanika and face the jaws of death in their efforts to eke out a living. Very little is also known about the role of the mafias who force the poor prawn farmers

to sell their catch at distressfully low prices while they rake in phenomenal profits. For these mafias entry of corporate giant is not welcome. The mafia will have to find a way to protect their territory and their right to the loot. They have done this well enough in Chilka.

Apart from the specific problem areas, there is also a lack of awareness in India among those who take decisions on wetlands — many are not aware that flood plains are wetlands. In Africa the largest wetland conservation projects are in their flood plains. In India, rising river beds create more waterlogged areas. This reduces the agricultural turnover and brings hardship to the people. The

task of managing these flow-plains is enormous and will have to undergo a basic change in both attitude and objective.

The strategy is clear — the water will have to be stored (to the extent possible) rather than drained. Such a project in flood plain management, all the three specialists agreed, will be a trend setter in this part of the world. This workshop was too premature to discuss strategies on wetlands management in Indian flow plains.

Admittedly, such occasional workshops thrust an additional burden on organizers and despite best efforts they tend to fall short of meaningful deliberations that could lead to tangible benefits to the thousands of wetlands subalterns who are unable to work out

a subsistence living or even to get stable employment, in spite of having excelled in every conceivable aspects of developing a sustainable use.

Calcutta's Mudiali workers are a case in point. True, there are the specialists who care — but there is the unhappy commonality among those all those who earn their living by creating an organized train of words — the experts — in that they seem to be indifferent to basic human rights for a large number of people struggling to survive on wetland ecosystems. We are worried about birds. Yes of course, birds are an integral part of the wetland lives, but so are the people. People who are living on wetlands and conserving it for their survival. ■