

# SAVE WETLANDS

## 'Stripping Ramsar tag would be disastrous'

Jun 15 2016 : The Times of India (Kolkata)



### A Teacher Writes Open Letter To Minister, Urging Him To Save East Kolkata Wetlands

Respected environment minister,

Having toured and filmed the East Kolkata Wetlands to teach my students regarding a geographical marvel, what I learned about the wetlands and its risks draws me to write to you. It took me by complete surprise to find in The Times of India editions dated June 10 and 11 that these wetlands -the only ones in the world on such a scale -faces the greatest risk from the very department that worked to earn it the Ramsar status. This must be a cruel twist of fate.

I request you as the public face of this department to kindly take note of the following facts: The East Kolkata Wetlands was discovered and its wise use practices documented as a result of a mandate by the State Planning Board. It was a formal mandate -to find out whether and how wastewater from the city could be re-used. Once enquiry brought the beneficial aspects of these wetlands to the fore, it was subsequently established before experts from the government of India and all over

the world. Then the department took the case to Ramsar. There was no arbitrariness in the process.

The drainage pattern of Kolkata and the wastewater re-use practices where nutrient is recovered in successive steps for fisheries, vegetables and paddy cultivation are the criteria that formed the basis of the map of East Kolkata Wetlands. This was the first example of participatory wetland mapping in India that the present government so emphatically talks about, especially the panchayat department. This map was also upheld by the Calcutta high court in a nationally acclaimed judgment that laid the foundation of wetland cases in India.

Dhapa's farmers are legendary . There are State Planning Board reports in the mid-1980s that describe their work and that of their illustrious but now forgotten mentor Bhabanath Sen (predecessor of former governor Shyama Prasad Mukherjee). In 1880, Sen started over the Dhapa square mile the earliest example of vegetable farming on a garbage substrate by the side of a city . This is a rare example of urban agriculture - organic input-based and climate-friendly to boot -where the city's organic waste was constantly recycled. This stellar practice has been on the wane and is in need of revival. It also solves in part the city's waste disposal problem. This is a rare heritage that has hardly been showcased to the world whereas this is something the citizens of Kolkata should justly be proud of.

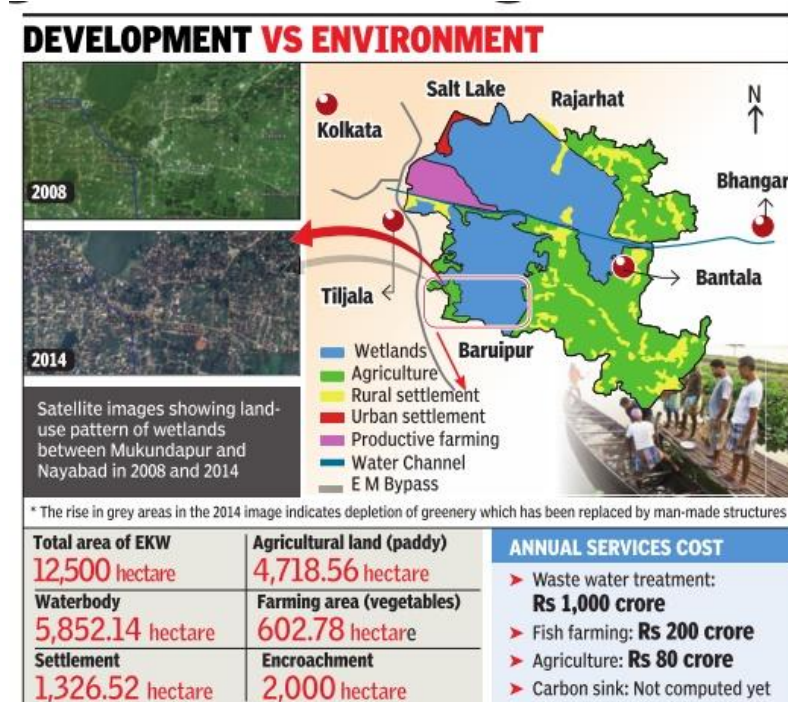
Scientific research has repeatedly established that these wetlands have survived because of the sound science and inimitable engineering practices associated with them. They are effortlessly carried out by a community who may not have the trappings of a formal education, but have the powers of observation and skill sets that are possessed by no other fishing community anywhere in the world.

I entreat you, with many other fellow travellers, to retain the character of these wetlands. In doing so, you will proudly be remembered to have preserved the city's natural capital and ecological subsidy for posterity .

Respectfully yours, Sudeshna Ghosh Geography teacher

# Wetland warriors rue green slaughter

Subhro Niyogi & Saikat Ray, Jun 11 2016 : The Times of India (Kolkata)



## Experts: Half The Encroachment Happened In Last 10 Years

For over three decades as a hidden agenda always enjoying political support, the wetland area was subjected to 'fill-up and build' strategy euphemistically termed 'development'. Dhrubajyoti Ghosh, who has been closely associated with the wetlands to the east of Kolkata for three-and-a-half decades, estimates a sixth of EKW has already been lost to nefarious land sharks that enjoy political patronage.

"Such is the pressure on EKW's inhabitants, mostly farmers and fishermen, that they lost confidence about the future of their livelihood there. Many are ready to leave at the expense of whatever little bargain they can make with local overlords. In essence, there is no East Kolkata Wetlands any more," he rued.

Ghosh, who undertook a survey of EKW last year, could not trace over 60 waterbodies. "There were 264 water bodies in 1998. During the survey, I found only 202. The remaining 62 had disappeared," he said.

Of the 12,500 hectares mapped as EKW in 1985, around 5,852.14 hectares comprised waterbody . Paddy is cultivated on 4,718.56 hectares while vegetables

are farmed on 602.78 hectares. The remaining 1,326.52 hectares comprised settlements. Ghosh said over 2,000 hectares have been lost: either waterbodies have been filled up or agricultural land converted to houses.


The pressure is most acute along EM Bypass and Basanti Highway . In moujas like Tardaha, Chakkalarkhal, Chowbaga, Karimpur, Kulberia, Bhagabanpur, Jagatpota, Mukundapur, Atghara, Kharki, Pashchim Chowbagha and Dharmatala Pachuria, there is huge encroachment pressure.

While encroachment in the marshlands has happened over the years, the past decade has witnessed unprecedented conversion of land use and construction. Ecologists and activists associated with the EKW believe more than half the current encroachment has happened in the past 10 years.

Bonani Kakkar, whose PIL in 1991 against the state proposal to construct a World Trade Centre on 227-acre marshland had led to the landmark Calcutta high court judgment by Justice UC Banerjee that paved the way for the Ramsar honour, rues the renewed attempt to ravage the wetlands. "We have been fighting for the wetland's survival for over two-and-a-half decades. Governments have changed but the mindset against environment has not. Environment is still viewed as an obstacle to development. That EKW actually provides services worth crores of rupees is never taken into account," said Kakkar. The cost of treating around 750 million litres of wastewater a day and producing 10,000 tonne fish and 36,500 tonne paddy and vegetables is Rs 1,280 crore. There is in addition the value of the wetlands as a huge carbon sink. Also, if the wetlands go, Kolkata will get inundated during monsoon as the city's topography naturally inclines to the east and the wetlands accommodate the stormwater. "Instead, we will have another New Town or something even smarter and will drive out 100,000 locals from their livelihood, a heritage skill that was never rewarded, nor recognised. Of course, the city will lose its cooling agent, will increasingly be hotter and lose its rich wealth of wetland biodiversity . Who bothers?" Ghosh said.

# Green concern over wetlands

Jun 10 2016 : The Times of India (Kolkata)

WHY WETLANDS ARE IMPORTANT	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>➤ Naturally treats 600 million litres of sewage daily</li><li>➤ As a natural soakpit, saves city from waterlogging</li><li>➤ 13,000 tonne of fish produced here</li></ul>
<b>Area</b> <b>12,500</b> hectare	<b>Listed as</b> <b>Ramsar site</b> <b>2002</b>
	<b>annually</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>➤ 55,000 tonne of vegetable grown here annually</li><li>➤ 2,500 tonne of garbage is dumped daily</li><li>➤ Provides livelihood to 100,000 persons</li></ul>

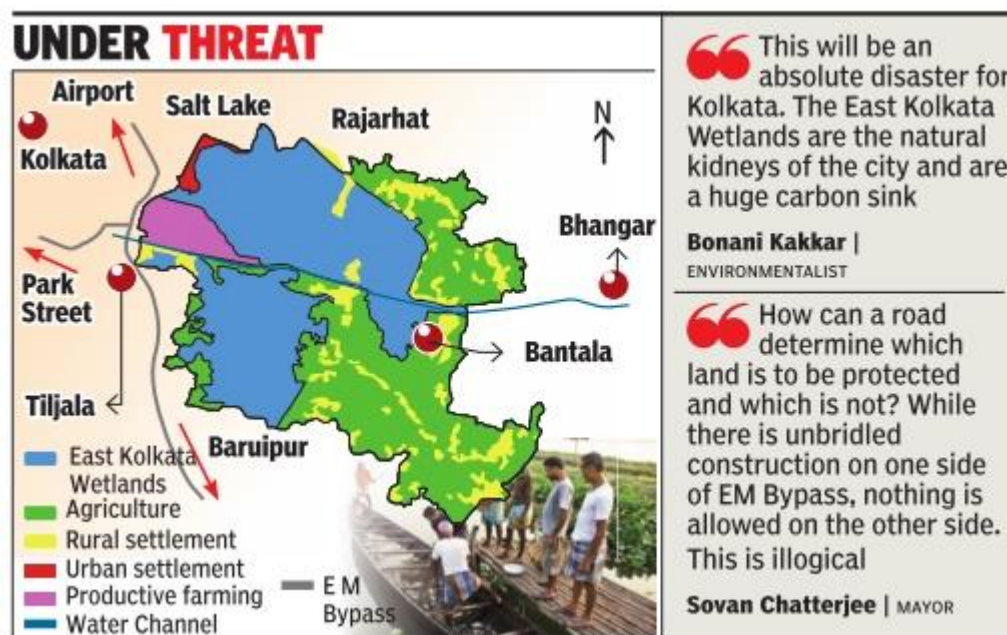
Less than four weeks after taking charge as state environment minister, Sovan Chatterjee -who is also Kolkata mayor -on Thursday said he wants to alter the status of the wetlands to the east of EM Bypass to take up development projects.

The East Kolkata Wetlands, spread over 12,500 acres, are protected under the international Ramsar Convention, to which India is a signatory .Speaking to TOI, Chatterjee reasoned that development projects were "as important to the city as environment conservation". Pointing to the Dhapa dump yard, which is in the heart of the Ramsar site and has become overburdened and prone to disaster, the mayor said an alternative site was available right next to it but could not be used due to the restrictions imposed by the Ramsar tag.

"One cannot ignore the legitimate requirements of a city and blindly follow environmental restrictions because someone decided to go to an international body with the wetland map and get a huge chunk of land demarcated for protection. If a disaster happens at Dhapa, won't it harm the environment?" the mayor argued. Scientists and environment activists were dumbfounded when they learnt of Chatterjee's plans. Bonani Kakkar of Public, whose PIL in Calcutta high court in 1991 led to the landmark judgment that secured the wetlands, said loss of this fragile ecosystem would be apocalyptic for Kolkata. Environmentalist Bonani Kakkar said, "The East Kolkata Wetlands treat sewage free of cost and prevent Kolkata from inundation during monsoon. The wetlands also ensure that the city's cost of living

remains low as it meets a quarter of the population's vegetable and fish requirement."

Mayor Sovon Chatterjee, however, questions the very logic of demarcating the area to the east of EM Bypass as wetlands while marshes of similar nature to the west are kept outside its purview."How can a road determine which land is to be protected and which is not? While there is unbridled construction on one side of EM Bypass, nothing is allowed on the other side. This is illogical," he said.



If need be, the mayor said, he will even push for a change in legislation so that "important civic projects" within the EKW precincts can be cleared. In fact, Chatterjee has even initiated a discussion on this issue at the mayor-in-council meeting earlier this week. Though there have been several encroachments and illegal filling of bheris or fish farms in the sprawling marshlands, the only official project that has happened there is the Dhapa water treatment plant near Science City. Its commissioning was, however, held up for months as environment activists went to Supreme Court challenging the "encroachment".

Scientist A K Ghosh, who had showcased the wise use of EKW at the Kyoto environment summit in 1997, fears that any change in status would open the floodgates for landsharks.

Ecologist Dhrubajyoti Ghosh, who had provided the map on the basis of which Justice Umesh Chandra Banerjee had declared the wetlands inviolate in 1992, said the government needed to act with caution and physically demarcate the boundary of EKW , put in place a proper management plan and set up an interpretation centre to explain the importance of the wetlands to citizens instead of “paving the way for its encroachment”.