



Kashmir Environment Node

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Kashmir wetlands may vanish in seven years

In the past 50 years, two-thirds of Kashmir's wetlands have vanished. So says a billboard outside Haigam conservation reserve, a premier wetland in the Baramulla district of Jammu and Kashmir that is plagued by massive silting and encroachment. Silt has reduced the Haigam wetland to almost half its original area of 7.25 sq km.

Five decades earlier, water levels in Haigam were over 10 feet but now the maximum depth is two and a half feet. These Wetlands are rapidly shrinking due to official apathy and rampant encroachment, endangering thousands of animals and migratory birds.

The state boasts of 16 wetlands, nine of them in Kashmir Valley. esro Experts predict these will vanish in around seven years if the authorities continue to neglect them. The Hokersar wetland, situated 16 km north of Srinagar, has also shrunk to 4.5 sq km compared to its original area of 13.75 sq km. Hokersar hosted 450,000 migratory birds last winter, but wildlife experts caution that the number of winged visitors has been steadily declining.

Worse, a large number of satellite wetlands found in areas adjoining bigger water bodies have completely vanished due to rampant urbanisation and encroachment. Wildlife expert Prof. G.M.Shah Coordinator Kashmir (esro) says: "Human folly has spelt doom for the wetlands. The damage can be arrested if

officials and citizens take initiative." Shah says the diversion of flood channels to wetlands has caused them to dry up. For instance, an initiative to siphon water from the Doodhganga canal into the Hokersar wetland to prevent heavy flooding in Srinagar city turned out to be a disaster. Over the years, the canal has deposited thousands of tonnes of silt into the wetland.

Government departments have funds, they lack technical experts and coordination in implementing programmes to manage wetlands. Last year Rs.3.2 million was spent under the National Wetland Management Action Plan funded by the central ministry of environment and forests.

A public interest petition in the state high court has also helped retrieve wetlands that were encroached upon way back in 1981. Encroachment is affecting other water bodies as well.

According to the environment Services & Research Organization Regional Coordinator Kashmir Node esro India Fayaz Ahmad Khan shrinking wetlands have affected the behaviour of water birds. Cormorants, which thronged these wetlands in the past, have gone down in number because of shallow water. The winged visitors have become more sensitive. They abandon the wetland over the slightest provocation, unlike in the past when even booming hunter guns did not scare them.

The wildlife protection department is embarking on a massive de-silting and de-weeding campaign to regain the wetlands. The forests and environment ministry has approved Rs.5 million for the purchase of equipment to facilitate manual de-weeding in Hokersar wetland. Similar experiments are being undertaken in the Haigam and Mirgund wetlands. The wetland preservation campaign seems to be gaining popularity among the public as well.

Says Prof. G.M Shah , Coordinator esro Wildlife Division "We are ready to offer voluntary consultancy services for preservation, but the government must take the initiative in such efforts."