

World Wetlands Day 2021

2nd February 2021

Virtual Event

Marking the 50th anniversary of signing of Ramsar Convention

The Ramsar Convention, the first amongst modern environmental agreements focused on ecosystems, came into being on February 2, 1971. The day is commemorated worldwide since 1984 as World Wetlands Day. The theme of 2021 World Wetlands Day was 'wetlands and water' highlighting the inseparability of wetlands and water management in the quest for sustainable development.

Wetlands International South Asia celebrated World Wetlands Day by organising a public webinar which was joined by 80 participants from India and neighboring countries.

Mr Suresh Prabhu (Hon'ble Member of Parliament – Rajya Sabha) graced the occasion as the Chief Guest. Prof Asit K Biswas, Distinguished Visiting Professor, University of Glasgow and a global authority on water policy and management issues delivered the key note address.

An eminent expert panel comprising Dr Sonam Wangchuk (Founder and Advisor, Students' Educational and Cultural Movement of Ladakh), Mr Sanjay Srivastava (Additional PCCF, Government of Uttar Pradesh) and Mr Sanjib Sarangi (Associate Vice President, Indian Grameen Services Orissa) discussed diverse perspectives on wetlands – water integration (programme attached as Annex I).

Four publications, namely, Sarovar (Newsletter of Wetlands International South Asia), World Wetlands Day Poster, A Guidebook on Management of High-Altitude Wetlands and a Training Module on Wetlands and Water was also released during the event.

25 years of work on wetlands conservation in South Asia

Wetlands International South Asia was established in India in 1996 with a mandate for wetlands conservation in South Asia region. Introducing the organisation, Dr Sidharth Kaul (President, Wetlands International South Asia) highlighted the organization's engagement on science, policy and practice elements of wetland management in South Asia. The work on strengthening wetlands management planning, capacity development, assessment of wetlands status, trends, and climate risks, citizen science, enabling local action for integrating wetlands in development plans and engagement with conventions was discussed. A roadmap for future actions comprising building up a South Asian platform, improving science and practice of wetland management and building capacity at various levels was laid out. A call for joining Wetlands International South Asia as a member to promote affirmative action for wetlands conservation was made.

Wetland guardians for every village

Mr Suresh Prabhu while delivering the presidential address reminded the audience of the 50 years of signing of the Ramsar Convention and commitment to conserve and wisely manage the immense wetland wealth of the country. He pressed upon the need for strengthening wetland management at all levels and providing support to well-meaning and integrated management action plans to guide local actions.

Mr Prabhu highlighted the critical role of wetlands in sustaining surface and ground water which formed the backbone of agriculture. Protection and sustainable use of wetlands was therefore critical to water, food and climate security.

Mr Prabhu urged for an increased local action and local community engagement in wetlands conservation. Making reference to the Nisarg Rakshak (Nature Guardians) initiative, he called for creating networks of wetland guardians in every village and town of the country. This is critical to promote local stewardship of wetland wealth of the country. He also extolled the need for making a more comprehensive effort for addressing wetland management rather than short bursts of problem centred action.

Integrating wetlands in water management – emerging complexities

Setting the context of the technical seminar on wetlands and water, Dr Ritesh Kumar, Director, Wetlands International South Asia brought to fore the value of wetlands as modifiers of water cycle and a distributed water resource all across the landscape, performing critical functions of ground water recharge, purification of water, buffering of floods, organic sewage treatment, providing habitat to diverse species, stabilizing shorelines and providing livelihoods to wetland communities, amongst others. While integrated water resources management has been positive as a framework for balancing water allocation for environment and development, wholesale and multiscale policy and practice changes are seldom realized. Closure of basins puts water for ecosystems at a tradeoff with developmental uses. The implication of hydrological regulation on sediments is seldom considered – a phenomenon which is increasingly leading to sinking of deltas against arising sea level. The modern pollutants such as antibiotic residues and microplastics are not amenable to conventional water treatment technologies. In the milieu of such changes, water resilience building across landscape may be the leverage point wherein wetlands can act as nature-based solutions for various water management challenges.

Water gets into political discourse only when floods and droughts happen

Prof AK Biswas (Distinguished Visiting Professor, University of Glasgow, UK; Chairman, Water Management International, Singapore) in his key note address, stressed that water scarcity is largely due to mismanagement, and not a physical scarcity of the resource. Water management seldom finds place in business as usual, rather only garners policy makers' attention when there is either a flood or a drought. He added that there is an excessive focus on managing water supply, but not the resource.

He shared learnings from China and Singapore which can be replicated to combat water security challenges. Stressing on effective reuse of wastewater, using nature-friendly and cost-effective practices, Prof Biswas indicated the value of learning from cities such as

Phnom Pneh (Cambodia). The city had after years of centralized management and a culture of inefficiency and corruption, turned the water supply system around drastically reducing unaccounted water and increasing water production, distribution network and overall profitability.

Prof Biswas also focused on economic efficiency of water supply systems and ensuring that the cost of water supply is factored in (while taking into account social dimensions such as poverty and income inequalities). This would promote a culture of conservation and reduce wastage of precious resource.

Prof Biswas suggested that well conserved and sustainably managed wetlands function as vital parts of water systems. There was immense scope of innovation using wetland mediated technologies to augment water availability in a landscape.

Creativity and innovation for conserving high altitude wetlands

Dr Sonam Wangchuk (Founder, SEMCOL) highlighted the hydrological and ecological significance of high-altitude wetlands as providers of baseflows of rivers and buffering floods and droughts. Despite their tremendous role, wetland ecosystems often do not receive enough attention and mostly remain hidden in environmental agendas.

Referring to the situation in Ladakh, Dr Wangchuk stated that wetlands have been stressed due to rapid ground water development and impacts of climate change. Innovative solutions as 'glacier *stupas*' demonstrated ways in which water availability in cold arid desert settings could be enhanced.

Dr Wangchuk called for improving community capability to address water management challenges, using low cost, innovative and climate friendly technologies.

Solving the wetlands and land records conundrum

Mr Sanjay Srivastava (Additional PCCF and Chief Executive Officer, Uttar Pradesh Compensatory Afforestation Fund) emphasized on incorporating wetlands within land records as a safeguard against rapidly intensifying development pressures on these vital ecosystems. The effective use of district administration in surveying the wetlands and incorporation in land records as demonstrated in Uttar Pradesh can be replicated in other parts of the country.

Mr Srivastava spoke about the value of Ramsar site designation as a means for increased attention to wetlands of global conservation value and mobilizing central and state governments' commitment to wetland wise use.

Mr Srivastava also stressed on the value of bringing convergence in different central and state government schemes to achieve wetlands conservation and water security in ensuring wetlands and wildlife conservation while also addressing water security.

Creating livelihood impacts from wetlands conservation

Mr Sanjib Sarangi (Associate Vice President, Indian Grameen Services Odisha) shared the experience of community transformation and resilience building through presenting a case study of Mangalajodi (Odisha). The village located on the northern shoreline of Chilika once infamous for bird poaching, has now converted into a community of well-trained bird watchers gaining livelihoods through ecotourism.

The transformation of this village into an ecotourism hub led to the creation of livelihood opportunities and enhanced incomes to combat poverty and unemployment challenges. The value of creating a proconservation behaviour through sustained engagement, trust building, ethical practices, partnerships and self-regulation was highlighted.

Bridging wetlands and water management

The discussions at the World Wetlands Day webinar highlighted the challenges and opportunities for integrating wetlands into water management policies and practices in the South Asia region. Some key takeaways are:

- It is important to build community stewardship and capacity to manage the diverse wetland resources towards building water and food security. Solutions which are cost effective and tailored to local needs need to be explored diligently making use of modern technology.
- Wetlands as nature-based solutions can provide much needed flexibility to the conventional water infrastructure, however, there is a need to make management systems more effective, inclusive and transparent.
- Effective land and water governance is at the core of water-wetlands connect. By building convergence amongst different developmental schemes and implementing organisations, multiple goals of wetlands conservation, wildlife protection, water security and livelihoods can be met.

World Wetlands Day

February 2, 2021

Wetlands International South Asia

Virtual Event

- 1400 hrs- Welcome
- 1402 hrs - Introduction to WWD event
Dr Sidharth Kaul, President, Wetlands International South Asia
- 1420 hrs- Release of publications by Chief Guest
- Newsletter Sarovar – Volume VII
 - Poster on World Wetlands Day theme
 - Guide book on Management of High-Altitude Wetlands
 - Training Manual on Wetlands and Water Management
- 1425 hrs- Address by Hon'ble Chief Guest
Shri Suresh Prabhu, Hon'ble Member of Parliament, Rajya Sabha
- 1500 hrs- Vote of thanks to Chief Guest
- 1505 hrs- Introduction to Seminar on 'Water and Wetlands'
Dr Ritesh Kumar, Director, Wetlands International South Asia
- 1515 hrs- Address by Guest of Honor
Prof Asit K Biswas, Distinguished Visiting Professor, University of Glasgow and Director, Water Management International Pte Ltd, Singapore
- 1545 hrs- Panel Discussions
Chairman Prof A K Biswas
- Distinguished panellists*
Shri Sanjay Srivastava, Additional Principal Chief Conservator of Forests, Government of Uttar Pradesh
Dr Sonam Wangchuk, Founder and Advisor, Students' Educational and Cultural Movement of Ladakh
Mr Sanjib K Sarangi, Associate Vice President, Indian Grameen Services Odisha
- 1645 hrs- Questions from floor
- 1700 hrs - Session conclusions and Vote of Thanks

Snapshots from World Wetlands Day 2021



Mr Suresh Prabhu delivering the Chief Guest's address



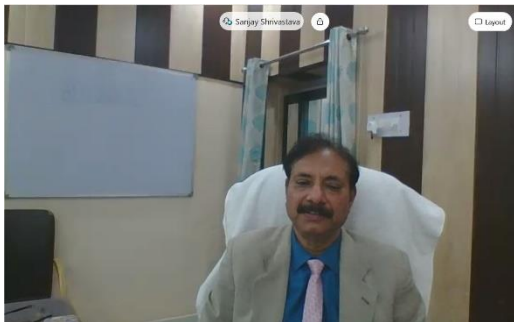
Dr Sidharth Kaul welcoming the participants to the World Wetlands Day event



Prof Asit K Biswas delivering the keynote address



Dr Sonam Wangchuk speaking about water management challenges of Ladakh



Mr Sanjay Srivastava sharing his experiences of incorporating wetlands in land records in Uttar Pradesh



Mr Sanjib Sarangi presenting the case study of Mangalajodi (Odisha)