

ENVIRONMENT

Save the wetlands

Though wetland ecosystems make up only about six per cent of the Earth's surface, they support nearly 30 per cent of all species, provide essential water purification, and act as vital carbon sinks. Yet, these fragile ecosystems are disappearing at an alarming rate.

"You can see how many construction sites there are in the wetlands region of Calcutta, and how many high-rises have come up there in the three years that I have been here. It is more important than ever to raise awareness about this important ecosystem," said German consul general Barbara Voss while introducing a recent Climate Talk titled 'Beautiful Wetlands — Partnering for Water, Partnering for Life', organised by the German embassy and the German consulate general.

Highlighting the green and sustainable development partnership between India and Germany, Voss stressed the need to support grassroots initiatives working in the wetlands. "We need people who are active in the wetlands, working not only with local communities but also with the next generation, with young students who understand the importance of wetlands and can spread the message further," she said.

The discussion, moderated by Shambhavi Krishna, forestry and biodiversity advisor, German Agency for International Cooperation (GIZ India), brought together several voices from the field. Among them was Nobina Gupta, founder of Disappearing Dialogues, who has been working in the wetlands for nearly a decade. "As the name Disappearing Dialogues suggests, we are trying to discover what alternative dialogues can emerge from the community spaces where we work. Not everyone understands what wetlands stand for or why they are so valuable," she said.

Gupta spoke passionately about the "immense traditional knowledge" embedded in the wetlands ecosystem. "If we look at how organic wastewater is used for fishing and farming, it is extraordinary. The fishermen understand soil nutrition intuitively. Then there are the medicinal plants, edible plants, the houses they build — their entire everyday life is deeply sustainable," she said.

Describing the 12,500 hectares of wetlands on Calcutta's eastern fringe as "the biggest treasure that we can have", Gupta warned of the consequences of unchecked urbanisation. She pointed to Delhi's pollution crisis as an example of what happens when cities lose their water bodies. "Calcutta still has many of them, though we are losing them

rapidly," she said. "The wetlands perform a purifying miracle every day, but they are under immense stress. Wastewater from our homes now contains so many synthetic products that foam accumulates in the canals, many of which are poorly maintained. If these canals are choked, what will happen?"

She also emphasised the city's dependence on the wetlands for food. "We enjoy our *shaak* and *shukto*, but do we stop to think where these vegetables come from? Fishermen enter ponds at three in the morning to provide fish for us.

Forest Service officer, reflected on his years overseeing wetlands conservation in West Bengal, including the East Kolkata Wetlands. "It is almost miraculous that 12,400 hectares of wetlands survive beside a bustling metropolitan city," he said. "People involved with the wetland management authority constantly battle encroachment by powerful interests."

Roy pointed out that much of the wetland area is privately owned, making conservation even more challenging. He also referred to the numerous court cases fought to protect the wetlands and acknowledged the pioneering work of Dr Dhruvajyoti Ghosh, whose efforts laid the foundation for the statutory framework that enabled their conservation.

As a former chief wildlife warden, Roy also oversaw the Sundarbans, the largest wetland under the Ramsar Convention, spread across 4,200sqkm. He shared another conservation success story — the regeneration of sal forests in south Bengal.

Roy, who started the climate change cell in the environment department in 2006, spoke of other government initiatives too, like cleaning of underground sewerage lines to tackle the challenge of drainage after intense precipitation. "I used to say in my service years that when every department starts integrating climate change concerns into their annual programmes, then there would be no need for the environment department's climate change cell. Now this is being done," he pointed out.

The third panellist, Madhura Mitra, partner — climate and carbon, sustainability transformation, at PricewaterhouseCoopers, spoke about her experiences working in the Sundarbans. "Because of migration, many households there are now women-run. We realised that before discussing climate adaptation or livelihoods, women first needed financial literacy. So the first thing we did was help them open bank accounts," she said.

Mitra argued that one reason conditions in the Sundarbans have not improved substantially despite decades of philanthropic and corporate interventions is the absence of sustainable financing. "CSR funding is available only for fixed periods. A company may help dig a pond, but once the funding cycle ends, the project often struggles to survive. We need financing mechanisms that ensure long-term sustainability," she said.

She also addressed the tension often perceived between conservation and development. "The moment we talk about conservation, people assume it is anti-development. Either you develop or you conserve. But can conservation itself generate profit? Can wetlands become economically valuable while remaining protected? These are questions clients frequently ask me," she said. "We need to find ways in which conservation and development can coexist."

The German embassy's climate meet discusses the urgency of protecting Calcutta's wetlands and more



Nobina Gupta addresses the audience flanked by (l-r) moderator Shambhavi Krishna, Madhura Mitra, and Debal Ray



(L-R) Goethe Institut director Astrid Wege, German consul general Barbara Voss, and Taina Dyckhoff, counsellor for climate and environment of the German embassy, in the audience

If we lose this ecosystem, we will be left only with packaged products full of preservatives," she said.

Disappearing Dialogues has been documenting local traditional knowledge while amplifying community voices. "Scientific knowledge has always taken centre stage, but there is another kind of knowledge that exists around us. If scientific and traditional knowledge can come together, we may find important solutions to climate challenges and recurring cyclones," Gupta said.

The organisation also works to bridge the gap between the city and the wetlands by bringing urban children to the wetlands and taking children from wetland communities into the city, encouraging them to tell their own stories through films, booklets and awareness campaigns.

Debal Roy, former principal secretary and retired Indian



East Calcutta Wetlands in Sector V, Salt Lake



The Sunderbans

Sudeshna Banerjee

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