

Press Release: WWD, Feb 2, 2013

World Wetlands Day 2013

Include rivers in India's definition of Wetlands, follow the Ramsar Convention

As the world and India celebrate the Wetlands Day¹ on the 2nd of Feb this year, we are leaving out a very significant wetland type from protection and conservation under the Ramsar Convention. Our Rivers today are endangered by dams, diversions, hydropower projects, pollution, encroachment, mining, over exploitation, deforestation, climate change and they need urgent protection. Currently rivers have no legal or institutional protection. India had 45041 km of perennial rivers as per Central Pollution Control Board assessment in early 1980s.

As per the Ramsar Definition, Wetlands are defined as “areas of marsh, fen, peatland or water, whether natural or artificial, permanent or temporary, with water that is static or flowing, fresh, brackish or salt, including areas of marine water the depth of which at low tide does not exceed six meters” Significantly, it also includes: Permanent Rivers, seasonal and intermittent Rivers and permanent Deltas. Many countries across the world have nominated riverine stretches and deltas as Ramsar Sites. These include deltas like Danube in Romania and Orange in South Africa, Rivers like Maduganga in Srilanka, Murray Darling in Australia, Maruyama in Japan, Krabi in Thailand, to name a very few.

India's rivers are some of the most scenic, biodiversity rich, culturally significant and truly iconic ecosystems in the world. Despite this, Wetlands (Conservation and Management) Rules 2010 (the only legal instrument explicitly for wetlands protection), shockingly EXCLUDE Rivers from the definition of Wetlands, thus ensuring that no riverine stretches will be nominated by states as proposed Ramsar Sites for protection. Section 2 (g) of the Rules says wetlands does not include “Main River Channels”.

The only riverine Ramsar Site in India is the Upper Ganga Stretch protecting last remaining populations of Gangetic Dolphins. We do not have any explicit protection for Rivers through our Protected Area Network, or through Frameworks like the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD). More and more biodiversity rich riverine stretches are falling prey to short sighted profit driven projects like dams, hydropower projects and barrages. Important rivers like Sutlej, Beas, Ravi, Chenab, Alaknanda, Bhagirathi, Teesta, Tawang chu, Nyamjangchu, Lohit, Siang, Dibang, Narmada, Krishna, Cauvery, Godavari, Chalakudy, Rivers of Western Ghats, etc. are being destroyed by cascades of dams being sanctioned by authorities like the Union Ministry of Environment and Forests, its Expert Appraisal Committee (EAC) on River Valley Projects, Forest Advisory Committee without credible appraisal, or transparent and accountable regulation. As SANDRP's analysis released on Feb 1, 2013 shows, EAC of the MoEF has not rejected environmental clearance for a single hydropower or irrigation project it received, in all of its 63 meetings since April 2007.²

At the same time, even designated Ramsar wetlands are in peril in India due to the dams and unregulated water abstractions.³

Looking at the rapid pace of river degradation & urgent need for protection, this World Wetland Day we urge:

- The MoEF to amend Wetlands Rules (2010) to include Main River channels in its definition of Wetlands, in line with Ramsar Conventions definition of Wetlands.
- All states to nominate important rivers, riverine stretches and deltas, in a participatory manner, for protection and conservation under the Ramsar Convention.
- Legal protection to rivers, also mandating that no more than 50% of the water from a river can be taken out by any project at any given point of time, as directed by the Allahabad High Court.
- Communities be given key role in protection of rivers and wetlands, currently lacking in the Wetlands Rules (2010)

Kumbh Mela, the World's biggest cultural gathering is happening at Allahabad, the confluence of Ganga, Yamuna and the mythical Saraswati, as we write this. Sacred rivers where this is happening are at a grave risk. Four years after the setting up of the National Ganga River Basin Authority under the chairmanship of the Prime Minister, the state of the Ganga River, and its associated floodplains has only gone from bad to worse. Our rulers would be happy, it seems, if all our rivers become mythical, hidden and unseen, like the Saraswati.

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[1] The day is celebrated remembering the inception of the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands in 1971, see www.ramsar.org/.

[2] For details please contact SANDRP and see:

https://sandrp.files.wordpress.com/2018/03/tor_and_ec_clearance_status_all_india_overview_feb2013.pdf

[3] See for details: https://sandrp.files.wordpress.com/2018/03/indias_wetlands_in_peril_feb_2011.pdf