

EAST KOLKATA WETLANDS FIELD VISIT REPORT



Third Year students from the West Bengal National University of Juridical Sciences, Kolkata, were taken for an academically enriching field visit to the East Kolkata Wetlands in Kolkata on Saturday, 11th February 2023. It was conducted under Dr M. P. Chengappa and Dr Atul Alexander as a part Administrative Law course curriculum.

The East Kolkata Wetlands (EKW), located on the eastern fringes of Kolkata city bordering the Salt Lake township on the one hand and the new township at Rajarhat on the other, forms one of the largest assemblages of sewage-fed fish ponds. It is situated between the wetlands spread over an area of 12,500 hectares. The East Kolkata Wetlands nurtures the world's most extensive wastewater-fed aquaculture system. Sewerage sent to the wetlands is subjected to solar purification followed by natural oxidation. On 19th August 2002, the East Kolkata Wetlands were included in the Ramsar list of 'Wetlands of International Importance'. However, this site is under threat from various directions because of the increasing pressure of urbanisation, changes in the quality and quantity of solid waste and sewer, and human neglect.

The East Kolkata Wetlands (Conservation and Management) Act, 2006, represents an important landmark as it paved the way for establishing the East Kolkata Wetlands

Management Authority (EKWMA) for the conservation and management of the East Kolkata Wetlands. The East Kolkata Wetlands Management Authority was constituted under Section 3 of the Act, 2006. As per the East Kolkata Wetlands (Conservation and Management) (Amendment) Act, 2017, notified by the State Government vide no. 304-L dated 17.03.2017, the EKWMA was reconstituted. According to the said Amendment Act, 2017, the EKWMA is now a thirteen-member body with the Chief Secretary and Secretaries of different Departments of State Government as well as four experts each in the areas of wetland ecology, hydrology, fisheries and socio-economics under the chairmanship of Minister-in-Charge, Department of Environment, Government of West Bengal.

Besides the East Kolkata Wetlands (Conservation and Management) Act, 2006 and as amended from time to time and Rules made thereunder, the East Kolkata Wetlands Management Authority is also guided by the Wetlands (Conservation and Management) Rules, 2017, notified by the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change, Government of India.

Kolkata is also a low-lying city; on average, it is barely five metres above sea level, served by two major rivers and surrounded by waterways. Its unique wetlands to the east are under pressure from developers like never before, just when they might prove most useful. Hundreds of buildings, from luxury apartments to colleges to more modest homes, are going up in an area supposedly protected from development by law.

Faced with the rising sea levels and increased storminess brought on by climate change, cities all over the world at risk of the costliest damage are having to rethink their relationship with natural and artificial flood defences. According to the World Bank, an optimistic forecast of just 20cm of sea level rise by 2050 would still make Kolkata the third most exposed city in the world to the risk of flooding. Such projections no longer belong to a distant future. The wetlands in Kolkata serve three functions that seem contradictory at first glance: the city's free sewage works, protection against floods, and a fertile aquatic market garden. As well as fish, wastewater is used in paddy fields, and vegetables are grown on the verdant banks and a long, low hill created by Kolkata's organic waste. This recycling makes Kolkata the most affordable metropolitan city in India.

Students were introduced to Mr. K. Balamurugan, an Indian Forest Officer working as the Chief Environmental Officer for the Government of West Bengal, who spoke in detail about the environmental conservation efforts and administrative framework for the wetlands in

Kolkata. Mr. K. Balamurugan led the students across the field to visit the area, followed by breakfast and activities conducted by the students. It was an enriching learning experience as students learnt about the nuances of administrative hurdles that come with environmental conservation projects, the stakeholders and the importance of coordination and administrative decision-making process. The field visit was organised with the help of student coordinators named Ms. Simran Sonkar, Ms. Ambreen Rahman, Ms. Shreya Singh, Ms. Poulami Das and Ms. Arpita Jaiswal.