

Summary of Decision Maker Consultation on Wetlands

Initial Inputs from Participants – Issues related to wetlands

Pollution of wetlands through discharge of sewage, solid waste disposal and industrial waste -

- Pollution can have different effects, ecological imbalances in soil nutrients, toxic waste
- Local authorities also use wetlands as dumping grounds. (Use of low lying areas, including wetlands) e.g. Karadiyana. Lack of alternative space for waste disposal
- No significant reduction in amount of waste entering landfills (through methods such as recycling)
- Volume of solid waste generated (800 tons per day – city of Colombo) is high
- No separation of waste in disposal on the part of the community
- Cost of collection, transportation and dumping of solid waste is high and therefore is a lucrative business and many profit motivated groups seek to maintain the current system despite its environmentally hazardous impacts.
- Loss of biodiversity in sensitive wetland areas (e.g. Bolgoda lake and environs)

Encroachments in sensitive wetland areas-

E.G. – Kolonnawa, Mattakuliya, Bellanvila, Bolgoda

- Encroachments by various individuals of varied income groups
- Lands acquired for flood detention reallocated for development purposes. Process of land release not transparent .
- Problem of politically influenced land filling.
- Use of low income groups to claim land through encroachment
- Lack of available real estate and increasing demand putting pressure on wetlands

In light of the participant inputs areas critical problems of wetlands around Colombo were identified as filling and encroachment, Solid waste disposal and waste water disposal. Other problems identified included eutrophication of wetlands, hydrological modification and the release of ornamental fish and plants to wetlands which included invasive species.

Hydro-ecological fate of Colombo wetlands (Presentation – M. Hettiarachchi)

Wetlands are not showcased or well understood and not exclusively protected in most countries. However they perform vital services to urban centres and are the only remaining green areas in most cities (e.g. Colombo). Wetlands also serve as outside services to urban system serves as a conveyer of water resources to low-lying eco systems and are also linked to paddy land. The Kolonnawa wetland conversion over 25 year period is 13.4 % while nearby paddy land conversion around 60%.

A study of water quality over 1 year shows a loss of bio diversity in both bird and fish species and a reduction of faunal diversity. Furthermore there has been a clear proliferation of invasive species. This has resulted in a transformation of wetland vegetation. Changes from marsh to shrub wetlands to uplands 1981-2008 is alarmingly high (44% of marsh is now shrub wetland). The change in soil characteristics indicates a changing ecology and slow territorialisation. This results in more frequent flooding and ecological regime changes.

Urban Wetland Services- (Presentation – Dr. D. Wickramasighe)

The IUCN estimates of ecosystem values (USD 33 trillion) of which wetlands are valued USD 14.9 trillion (45%). Urban wetlands are the main habitat for aquatic weeds and act as carbon sinks for urban areas. The western province has a high concentration of wetlands but this is changing rapidly.

Discussion of Presentations

- Q- Kolonnawa marsh – Are there any specific areas which should be conserved ?
A- The Periphery is degraded, however difficult to declare individual areas, though currently entire area is a protected zone.
- Q- To reverse such trends of degradation what actions need to be taken? What action is being taken now?
A- Use of strong legal means, removal of political influence/interference. Greater stakeholder cooperation.

A2- Removing invasive species to prevent further degradation of wetlands. However there are difficulties e.g. "wel atha" removal cost budgeted at 700 million rupees
- Q- Are wetlands considered as a possible tourist attraction?
A- They are not utilised as a tourist attraction to any significant degree, while the economic benefits could help protect wetlands, careless promotion may result in further degradation.
- Wetland degradation could also be curtailed to some degree by addressing the root causes of overpopulation in urban areas (reduce rural-urban migration through rural opportunity)
- Q- Are there any marked differences between different wetlands, in term of the level of degradation?

- A-A comparison of Bellanvilla and Kolonnawa wetland areas would suggest differences in nature of degradation based on land usage purposes in surrounding areas (Industrial effluents in Bellanvila, sewage in Kolonnawa etc) There is no great difference in effect due to differences in the extent of degradation.
- How can the importance of wetlands be highlighted? Perhaps a conscious effort should be made to make it a part of the “pride of the city” in the same way that parks or lakes might be viewed.

Panel Discussion

Speaker 1 - Mr. Jayasinghe (Central Environmental Authority)

Wetland conservation on was conducted by CEA through Dutch funding and 30 were reports compiled. The ministry if of environment as introduced a national wetland policy in 2005. Steps have also been taken to amend National Environment Act as there is no provision for wetland management and the establishment of national wetland management unit. Other measures include the declaration of Thalangama tank, Muthurajawela and Bolgoda lake as protected areas.

Speaker 2 - Mrs. Kalupahana (Urban Development Authority)

The UDA’s involvement in wetland conservation would be in creating and enforcing regulations, hence mainly of a legal nature. As an institution it participates in the CEA wetland steering committee and is a member of the Coastal Conservation Department. It seeks to integrate development plans with these agencies. The UDA also conducted a western province wetland zoning. Though this did not proceed to gazetting specific conditions and regulations were established based on the zoning programme. The UDA is also integrated with the ministry of environment’s “Haritha lanka” programme and the wetlands in “green cities” program.

Speaker 3 -Ms. Wickrama (District Secretariat, Colombo)

As an administrative and coordinating body the Colombo district development plans by divisional secretariat include an allocation of LKR 100 million for minor irrigation.

Speaker 4 -Mr. Jayakody (Irrigation Department, Colombo)

I have noted widespread pollution of Bolgoda lake (near Kospalana Bridge) during field visits and also illegal land filling. However the Irrigation department has no legal power or mandate to address such issue and either does it have a legal unit to file action. We are however involved in flood control in collaboration with the SLLR & DC.

Questions and Answer Session

- There should be an integrated system for qualitative and quantitative monitoring of wetlands and a submission of findings to all relevant organizations
UDA response- UDA should be focused on conservation and sustainable development. UDA has a huge role at development planning level and needs to follow an integrated approach (with CEA, SLLRDC and researchers) Urban development plans are not static and changes and new findings could be integrated
- Can the CEA “*parisara bata kandayama*” initiative be integrated with wetland conservation? As the schools in some cases buffering wetland areas.
UDA – In the Diyawanna conservation programme there was an inclusion of student and resident stakeholders and also in the CEA programme at Thalangama tank
- How can policy makers be made more aware of the value of wetlands?
- Why is the research conducted on these issues not communicated to policy makers?
- Is there a gazetted development plan in Kolonnawa area that includes wetland areas?
UDA -Yes. Therefore as wetlands are protected illegal settlers can be prosecuted.
- How can local govt officials be made aware of existing bodies and programmes such as those conducted by the CEA?
- Currently where are there illegal fillings?
Irrigation response – Some areas include Pethiyagoda and areas surrounding the old Panadura Bridge etc. Other areas include those which were designated for necessary reservations for canal systems. Such reservations are necessary for dredging and without such reservations dredging is expensive, even prohibitively expensive.
- What is the most important tool currently available for prevention of further encroachment on wetlands? How can politicians be attracted to a wetlands steering committee meeting?

Solutions suggested on matters of policy generation and implementation

- Awareness on issues such as wetlands can be maintained only if regular communication is maintained or forums are conducted. The monthly meetings hosted by the district secretariat and in turn divisional secretariat division coordination meetings may be a platform for such discussion.
- However given the broad spectrum covered by such meetings an alternative might be a separate issue-based platform hosted by a body such as the UDA. Bodies such as the Sri Lanka water Partnership (SLWP) could also play a vital facilitator role in initiating networking between policy makers and researchers.
- Such Interventions may bring all stakeholders (including, but not restricted to politicians) including community into the decision making process and perhaps go towards implementation of integrated water resource management (IWRM).

Conclusion

At the end of the sessions moderator J. Bandaragoda observed some points of interest, noting that the issue of the deterioration of wetlands and its implications is largely as modern issue that has major implications for urban societies. Research into the impacts of encroachments on wetlands has done well to uncover some of the problems faced; yet there is a gap between research and policy making. While research has provided useful findings it has not translated into policy decisions. There challenge therefore is to connect the two. He also noted that while interventions by politically influential parties have been noted as one of the key obstacle to achieving such a synthesis its significance it should not become an excuse for inaction. Strategies may be found through inter-institutional cooperation to work around such obstacles.