

Wetlands of Noyyal river basin

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Conflicts in commercialization of Noyyal river basin Wetlands

Tamil Nadu state is situated in southern part of Indian peninsula. Coimbatore is the third largest city in Tamil Nadu and situated on the banks of the river Noyyal. Noyyal River originates in Western Ghats and confluence with river Cauvery at Noyyal via Coimbatore and Tiruppur district of Tamil Nadu. Totally it flows in 172 K.M. During the Kongu Chola's regime in 8th and 9th centuries there were 30 wetlands constructed on both sides of River Noyyal for irrigation and floods mitigation. All these wetlands are interconnected to each other and with the river Noyyal (Coimbatore District Epigraphs Vol.1).

Over 800 years these wetland were served well to both mankind and environment, but due to human greed, now all the wetland in and around Coimbatore are highly polluted.

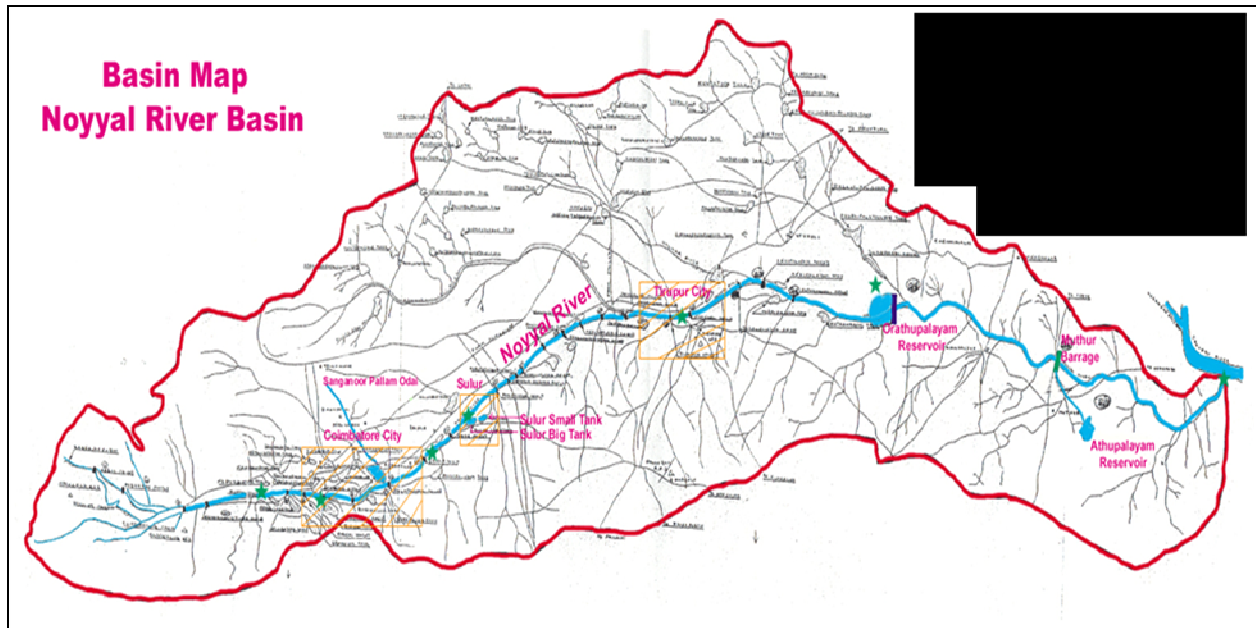
Traditionally, these wetlands play very important role in regulating the water levels in the Noyyal and preventing floods during excess rains in the city apart from underground water recharge. These wetlands are sources of fresh water for domestic and agricultural use but in recent years due to rapid urbanisation they are being used only by marginalised people living in the vicinity for domestic use, as grazing grounds for subsistence herders, by farmers for irrigation seasonally and also for fishing. Due to the unregulated and unsustainable extraction of groundwater in the city in recent years, their roles as water-table rechargers is one of the most important today.

Habitually, these wetlands are used by resident and migratory birds throughout the year. Large congregations of threatened birds like the Spot-billed Pelican and near threatened birds like the Painted Stork and Darter and several other water fowls regularly use these wetlands for feeding, breeding, roosting and nesting. Several studies conducted by researchers from Salim Ali Centre for Ornithology and Natural History, Bharathiar University, Government Arts College, PSG College of Arts & Science, Nirmala College, Tamil Nadu Forest Department and other institutions proved over 130 species of birds using these wetlands from its construction. All of these wetlands are under the authority of the Public Works Department (PWD), Govt. of Tamil Nadu, while eight wetlands (Narsampathy, Krishnampathy, Selvampathy, Kumaraswamy, Selvachinthamani, Periyakulam, Valankulam and Singanallur) that are under the Coimbatore Municipal Corporation limits have recently been leased by the Coimbatore Municipal Corporation from the PWD.

Conflict

Recent years the Government is not allocating funds to maintain the tanks since there is no water used for irrigation purpose from the wetlands. Coimbatore Municipal Corporation has initiated a programme to renovate and improve these eight wetlands with private participation after taken over of these wetlands. The estimate of the proposed project is Rs. 68.24 cores. In that regard 'Scott Wilson India Pvt Ltd' and 'Almondz Global Securities Ltd' were appointed as consultants by Tamil Nadu Urban Infrastructure Financial Ltd, who are the financial supporters for this project. In connection with this Coimbatore Municipal Corporation has conducted two

public meetings, held on 14th August and 26th October 2010 at the Coimbatore Corporation. District authorities including Mayor of Coimbatore Municipal Corporation, District Collector of Coimbatore and Commissioner of Coimbatore Corporation and few other environmentalists, NGO's and officials participated in the first meeting. In second meeting Commissioner of Coimbatore Corporation, Environmental Cell Division, PWD and other officials, several other environmentalists, and NGOs participated. In both meetings a presentation was made by Scott Wilson India Pvt Ltd and Almondz Global Securities Ltd about proposed privatization of the eight lakes. Along with a rejuvenation proposal, the project also proposed to Build-Operate-Transfer scheme of other commercial activities like urban Health Resorts and Spas, Food Courts, Water Theme Parks, Aquarium, Planetarium, Bird Park, etc., in and around the wetlands.



Map 1: Noyyal River Basin (Source WRO, PWD, Coimbatore)

In both the meetings environmental and commercialisation issues were raised by environmentalists, NGO's, farmer organisations and others. The consultants, 'Scott Wilson India Pvt Ltd' and 'Almondz Global Securities Ltd' were not able to explain any questions raised by environmentalists and farmers. After careful scrutiny of both the presentations and proposed project proposal an evaluation was made and merits and demerits were analysed.

Merits

The proposal suggested some steps for renovation of wetlands, based on old Detailed Project Report (Action for Food Production, Bangalore)

The proposal suggested to remove encroachments in the identified wetlands, based on old DPR (AFPRO)

Demerits

- Proposal clearly violates “Regulatory Framework for Wetland Conservation” set by Mo EF. Govt. of India ((C). Key Threats)
- Proposal violates the Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972 for conservation of scheduled species
- No biodiversity survey was conducted in the wetlands and referred in the 1st presentation as “No Endangered Species of Flora and Fauna” found in these wetlands
- The DPR didn’t mention any Conservation measures on wetland biodiversity including Rare, Endemic and Threatened & migratory species which are traditionally using these wetlands
- The DPR emphasis more on “Commercialization of Wetlands”, out of 12 chapters 7 chapters are on commercialization (2,3,6,7,8,9 & 12) than the renovation
- During summer most these wetlands would be dry, which will have negative effect on proposed commercial and recreational activities (DPR also referred in (Strength, Weakness, Opportunity and Threat) analysis(Chapter 3))
- The DPR referred Coimbatore Wetlands as **Commercial commodities** (Chapter 12) than the biological and ecological lifeline of Noyyal river basin
- As per the DPR one of the recreations is to establish **Bird Park** in the wetlands - No clear idea on it - question raised by naturalists as caged birds in their original habitat. But consultants replied as birds of Western Ghats will benefit from the project?

Present proposal and DPR clearly indicates that the consultants initiated an unethical war against traditional lifestyle of indigenous people, culture and coexistence with nature. Proposed project not only eliminate endemic flora and fauna of the wetland ecosystem of Coimbatore but also create an imbalance in natural ecosystem. Hence all the proposed commercial activities have to be stopped in Coimbatore wetlands. Citizens of Coimbatore are not against the removal of encroachments in and around the wetlands and also other rejuvenates activities of city wetlands, their concern is only on commercialisation of wetlands.



Fig1: Present condition of Coimbatore Wetlands (Source: WRO, PWD, Coimbatore)

Current status

The problems in Coimbatore wetlands are in dormant stage at present after tough protest by environmentalists.

Highest and lowest points

Conflicts arising gradually after Coimbatore Municipal Corporation took over the wetlands and it reach the highest level during the second round of discussion. The conflict reaches its lowest level, when Coimbatore Municipal Corporation kept the commercializing activities in dormant stage after strong opposition from the environment activists and NGOs.

The opposing stands

The environmentalists and NGOs actively worked an alternative solution to renovate these wetlands in Coimbatore. Except financial sources other problems are worked out and alternate funding source was also under consideration to implement the plans. NGOs and environmentalist meet 2-2-11 in PWD office decided to seek funds from Central, State Governments and local bodies.

Conservation Recommendations for Coimbatore Wetlands

- Removal of encroachments in and around wetlands has to be done
- Alternative arrangements to be made to deposit debris
- Removal of all solid wastes from the wetlands
- Waste water treatment plants with appropriate technology to be constructed at the water inlets
- Regular monitoring of physio-chemical properties of tank water has to be done
- Wherever necessary bund strengthening has to be done
- Planting of native trees on the bunds essential to stop soil erosion, to provide nesting opportunity to the water birds and shade to the walkers
- Small islands have to be created inside the wetlands with suitable tree saplings for foraging and nesting of water birds
- Unnecessary roads in and around wetlands has to be closed and fenced
- Erect necessary signage at appropriate places around wetlands
- Form restoration and watch dog committees for sustainable managements
- Commercialization or privatization of wetlands has to be stopped



Fig 2: Commercial models suggested by consultants Page No. 9.17 of DPR prepared by Scott Wilson India Pvt Ltd' and 'Almondz Global Securities Ltd'

If the same pattern of proposed project implemented in Coimbatore wetlands, it would be benefit only to the private parties (Commercial agencies). Coimbatore Municipal Corporation would also not receive appropriate revenue from the present format. Instead, biodiversity in the

wetland ecosystem will disappear. In particular locally migrating, threatened birds like the Spot-billed Pelican and near threatened birds like the Painted Stork, Darter and other water birds will lose their habitat. True migrants such as Lesser Booted Warbler, Rosy Pastor, Paddy field Warbler Whitethroat, Wood Sandpiper, Marsh Sandpiper, Brown Shrike, Garganey, Green Shank, Pin Tail, Common Swallow, Golden Oriole, White Wagtail, Yellow Wagtail and Black Bellied Sandgrouse will also move away from Coimbatore wetlands. Several economically important indigenous medicinal plants occur around these wetlands will also disappear. On the other hand, waste waters from Health Resorts and Spas, Food Courts, Theme Parks, Aquarium, etc would accumulate in the wetlands. Conditions of wetlands remain same as before rejuvenation, because instead of domestic and industrial effluents, the untreated water from these commercial clubs will be in these wetlands later.

A small group of stakeholders (partial fisher folks) are depending on these wetlands. Providing alternate employment can be the better solution for their livelihood. Accessible quantities of the fish from these wetlands are also less and that too during monsoon period only.

Commercializing Coimbatore wetlands fetch more ecological loss than the economical loss.



Fig 3: Threatened birds Spot-billed Pelican Source Save Coimbatore Wetlands

Scope for dialogue

The Coimbatorens require pleasant environment in the city especially in and around these wetlands for both birds and people. After careful study, Save Coimbatore Wetlands, recommend several mitigate measures to improve the quality of water and environment around the city wetlands. In this regard people of Coimbatore are ready to extend their support to Municipal Corporation's future actions. At present, people of Coimbatore have well understood problems in and around city wetlands and its rectification. Hence, all commercializing activities of city wetland have to be stopped and other fruitful activities on

improving the quality of wetlands have to be initiated. Further discussions would yield a common concession in this regard.

Key Institutions and People

Salim Ali Centre for Ornithology and Natural History, Coimbatore

Environment Cell Division, PWD, Coimbatore

Bharathiar University, Coimbatore

Government Arts College, Coimbatore

PSG College of Arts & Science, Coimbatore

Nirmala College, Coimbatore

Tamil Nadu Forest Department, Coimbatore

Save Coimbatore Wetlands, Coimbatore

Arulagam, Coimbatore

Siruthuli, Coimbatore

Osai Coimbatore

Discover wild

Environmental Conservation Group

Dr. K. Rathnam

Mr. Surajkumar

Mr. A. Sukumar

Dr. M. Gunasekaran

Mr. K. Mohanraj

Er. R. Ilangovan

C. R. Jayaprakash

Salim Ali Centre for Ornithology and Natural History, Anaikatty, organized a seminar on 12th November 2010 to mark the Salim Ali Centenary celebrations at Central Academy of State Forest Services (CASFOS) Forest Campus, Coimbatore. The Coimbatore district collector Dr. P. Umanath, was the chief guest of the function "Seminar on Urban wetlands of Coimbatore". Speakers from various walks of life were participated and expressed their concern over the issue.

In particular the following speakers were delivered lecture on the current problems.

- Wetlands As a source of water & its conservation, **Mr. Rajesh Govindarajalu** (Siruthuli, Coimbatore)
- Coimbatore Wetlands As the habitat of birds **Mr. A. Sukumar** (Veteran Bird Watcher, Coimbatore)
- Conserving Coimbatore Wetlands – the way forward **Mr. Kalidasan** (Osai Coimbatore)
- Coimbatore Wetlands & its environmental problems, An overview **Mr. K. Mohanraj** (Salim Ali Naturalist Forum, Coimbatore)
- Past, present and Future of Coimbatore Wetlands **Dr. M. Gunasekaran** (Save Coimbatore Wetlands)

- Sustainable utilization of Coimbatore tanks **Er. R. Ilangovan**, Environment Cell Division, PWD

In association with this issue third round of discussion was organized by Indian Chamber of Commerce Coimbatore chapter on 5th December 2010 Sunday. Local NGOs and environmentalists were participated it and decided to join hands on this issue for the benefit of Coimbatore people.

Details of author(s)

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Arulagam is a non governmental organization, intending primarily for the conservation of nature and it is named after the late environmentalist and teacher, Arul who inspired the young minds to raise their voices for conservation of environment. Arulagam (in Tamil language), literally means "Mercy Home" and is registered under the Tamil Nadu Societies Registration Act on the World Environment Day in the year 2002. The organization is enduring to serve as an active campaigner and advocating conservation of environment. Arulagam endeavors to conserve lesser known animals and plants too. Arulagam took active role in the initiation of Save Coimbatore wetlands.

The Chief Functionary of the organization, Mr. Bharathidasan.S, is one of the ardent followers of this great environmentalist in this part of the world and with this backdrop, he takes up the goal of environmental conservation in the target area. He is a freelance writer too and works with his community on conservation of nature and environmental issues by providing them with environmental news in Tamil language.

Dr. M. Gunasekaran, of Save Coimbatore Wetlands, has done his doctoral research in Temple Trees of Tamil Nadu at Salim Ali Centre for Ornithology, Coimbatore. Possess rich experience in leading research teams on problem based field studies for documentation and conservation of Biodiversity, including wetlands and rivers to the Government and non-governmental organizations.

Past one year we are involving in this issue. We sensitized the media to keen look at this issue. We also brought this issue to the residential association members in Coimbatore. Arulagam is planned to give a technical inputs with the support of likeminded organization.