

Govt joins wetland fight, finally

Starts Restoration Of Dankuni Wetland, To Send Bill To Firm That Dumped Fly Ash

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Kolkata/Dankuni: In a first-ever attempt to restore a wetland that had been filled up by promoters, the government has deployed heavy-duty earth-moving vehicles to scoop out tonnes of fly ash that had been dumped into the marshland.

The development has injected fresh vigour into the green movement at a critical juncture when nature lovers and environment activists were losing faith in the government that appeared to turn the other way as rules were blatantly flouted.

An excavator has been deployed to dig the fly ash and load it into trucks for disposal outside the site. "The district administration has decided to restore the wetland. Notices to clean up the area were sent to those who were filling up the site. But since they did not act, we decided to take up the restoration and bill the cost to the parties that had filled up the wetland," Hooghly district magistrate Manmeet Nanda said.

The Public Demands Recovery Act, 1913, will be invoked to realize the money from the seven-eight private firms that had filled up the wetland. Serampore SDO Jayashi Dasgupta is personally overseeing the wetland's recovery. "We won't allow any illegal filling. The cleanup will take a while because several hundred truckloads of fly ash have been dumped. We will return the wetland



BATTLE SO FAR

Feb 3, 2012 | The high court directs the state government to set up a high-power committee to review the status of wetlands in the state and suggest remedial and preventive measures to protect them

May 2012 | Committee submits report to chief secretary

Jan 27, 2013 | TOI and PUBLIC visit site

Feb 2, 2013 | TOI publishes picture of crushed yellow monitor lizard

May 10, 2013 | PUBLIC files PIL in Calcutta high court

May 16, 2013 | Environment department files report stating that both sides of Durgapur expressway are low-lying areas that stay wet throughout the year

May 17, 2013 | High court passes order stopping all filling and directing state to start restoration

July 6, 2013 | The SI of Chanditala PS serves order on Ultratech Cement to stop filling up work at their cement grinding unit

August 31, 2013 | Bird-watchers and PUBLIC volunteers visit site and find Ultratech continuing with fill-up work

October 9, 2013 | Birders and PUBLIC volunteers visit site. Restoration work seems to have started

Winged guests driven away in wetland fill-up

Monitor Lizard Crushed As Dumpsters Ravage Land

PUBLISHED ON FEB 2

to the state," she said.

The filling up of Mullarbaer, a 500-acre wetland in Dankuni, began late last year. Though some bird lovers who frequented the site on weekends to spot birds that thronged the marshes in hordes had voiced protests, they were drowned in the din of fly ash-laden trucks plying 24x7 to fill up the area.

The district administration remained inactive, choosing to look the other way as the encroachment continued at a frantic pace.

It was TOI that had reported the incident in January following a site visit with PUBLIC, a non-govern-

ment action group that had played a key role in saving the East Kolkata Wetlands from encroachment two decades ago. Other NGOs — WWF India, Disha and FHLLER — wrote a series of letters to state government officials about the destruction of the vast and unique wetlands but failed to

elicit any response.

What galvanized the NGOs into action were photographs of a yellow monitor lizard (protected under Schedule 1 of the Wildlife Protection Act, 1972 — the schedule that protects the tiger) crushed by the wheels of the trucks dumping fly ash into the wetlands.

"Despite repeated appeals to officials ranging from the chief secretary to the environment secretary to the forest secretary and even to the district magistrate, the trucks kept coming, 100-150 per day, choking the area with lethal fly ash," said Bonani Kakkar of PUBLIC.

Thereafter, PUBLIC, with support from other NGOs, filed a PIL at Calcutta high court to save the marshy land that was home to animals such as the jungle cat and the fishing cat, as well as a migratory stop for birds whose breeding grounds stretch from Finland to eastern Siberia.

According to some birding enthusiasts, even as late as last November, rare birds like the yellow-breasted bunting could be spotted, not to mention the western marsh harrier and the crested serpent eagle.

Responding to the PIL, the Chief Justice of Calcutta high court ruled that status quo be maintained and the nature and character of the land not be changed. The court later ordered that the wetland be restored.

"This is a landmark in joint action by the environment department, an NGO (PUBLIC), the media (TOI) and the judiciary. There is a message here that should register loud and clear for all land sharks. Personally, it is an incredible experience for me. It just goes to show that nothing is impossible," said Kakkar.