

Wetland woes move Ramsar official

Environmentalists Express Concern Over Rampant Urbanization Of East Kolkata Wetlands

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Kolkata: A representative of Ramsar Bureau — the Geneva-based secretariat of the Convention on Wetlands of International Importance — toured the East Kolkata Wetlands (EKW) on the city's fringes to assess the condition of the Ramsar site days after chief minister Mamata Banerjee decision to legitimize unauthorized construction there.

Sources told TOI, Ramsar Bureau senior regional adviser (Asia-Oceania) Lew Young expressed concern over the future of the wetlands following the CM's announcement that nearly 25,000 illegal construction within the Ramsar site will be regularized and its owners allowed to seek mutation from the Kolkata Municipal Corporation (KMC).

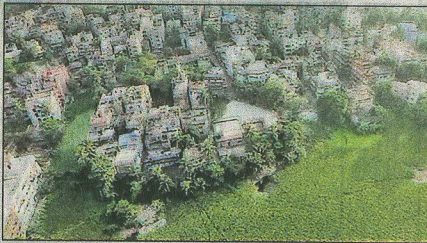
Addressing a gathering in the neighbourhood in Mukundapur off EM Bypass on Wednesday, Mamata said she had cleared a long-pending file that will allow KMC to extend its services, including water supply and drainage, to moujas that were within the EKW ambit but had been urbanized in recent years.

Mayor Sovan Chatterjee's statement that followed was even more shocking. After meeting a delegation of Par-

VANISHING GREEN

Of 247 bheris, 47 have disappeared. Of the 200, many have been kept dry without waste water for five-seven years

▶ The sprawling wetlands next to the EM Bypass appear like a vast stretch of green covering Chit Kalikapur, Shatabdi Park, Nayabad, Lake Village Society, Daspara and Khudirabad in the satellite image of 2002, but a satellite shot of the same area in 2008 shows some structures. Cut to 2014 and the image is



shocking. The lush green has been replaced by a dull gray, capturing the transformation to a concrete jungle

Delivering the judgment on a PIL filed by Bonani Kakkar of Public in the 1990s, Justice Umesh Chandra Banerjee had stated in his order that there will be no change in land use at EKW. As a citizen, I want EKW, that treats the city's sewage, to be protected

Subhas Datta | GREEN ACTIVIST

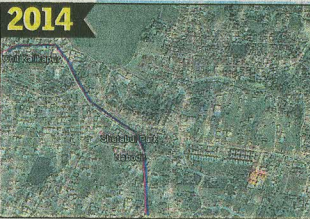
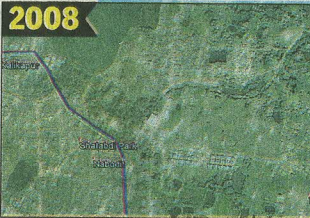
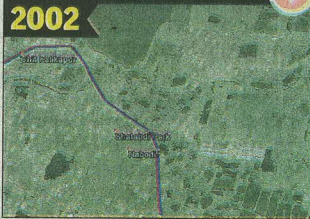


liamentarians from the UK that was in the city to sensitize corporators' on climate change, Chatterjee justified Mamata's decision to regularize construction at EKW by claiming that the wetlands meant little to the common man who needed civic serv-

ices more than environmental niceties.

Young, who had last been to EKW nearly 15 years ago, was in Kolkata on Friday to attend a wetland conference organized by Central Inland Capture Fisheries Research Institute and visited Nater Bheri

Satellite images of the stretch of East Kolkata Wetlands around the EM Bypass (marked in blue)



Institute of Cardiac Sciences and Karimpur and Bhagabanpur behind Ruby Hospital. In three other moujas, that were not part of the original EKW map published in a state planning board document in 1985 but appears to have been included later, construction is even more rampant.

While some of these localities within EKW or abutting it resemble a mofussil town than wetland, the real extent of change that has happened since it was declared a wetland of international importance can be gauged from satellite images of the area. While the sprawling wetlands next to the EM Bypass appear like a vast stretch of green covering Chit Kalikapur, Shatabdi Park, Nayabad, Lake Village Society, Daspara and Khudirabad in the satellite image of 2002, a satellite shot of the same area in 2008 shows some structures. Cut to 2014 and the image is shocking. The lush green has been replaced by a dull gray, capturing the transformation to a concrete jungle.

Now that Mamata has given her stamp of approval to the illegal conversion, wetland residents and activists fear further encroachment at a more brisk pace in the days ahead.

"What has happened in EKW is extremely unfortu-

nate. There has been no conservation activity in the last 10 years. On the contrary, there is large-scale encroachment. Real estate activity continued unchallenged while fish workers discovered multiple hurdles to continue in the trade. Supply of waste water was reduced to choke fish production and hit the livelihood. A grand design to usurp the wetlands seems to be at work. This appears to be the beginning of the end of EKW," a wetland expert said.

Green activist Subhas Datta is livid over the deliberate negligence of EKW and questions how the CM made such a declaration when a Calcutta high court order and an international convention had placed restrictions on changes. "Delivering the judgment on a PIL filed by Bonani Kakkar of Public in the 1990s, Justice Umesh Chandra Banerjee had stated in his order that there will be no change in land use at EKW. Similarly, the Ramsar Bureau states that there will be no ecosystem changes. Yet, the construction activity is an irreversible change. As a citizen, I want EKW that treats the city's sewage and is practically Kolkata's kidney, to be protected," said Datta whose last big fight was to save Kolkata's lung, the Maidan.