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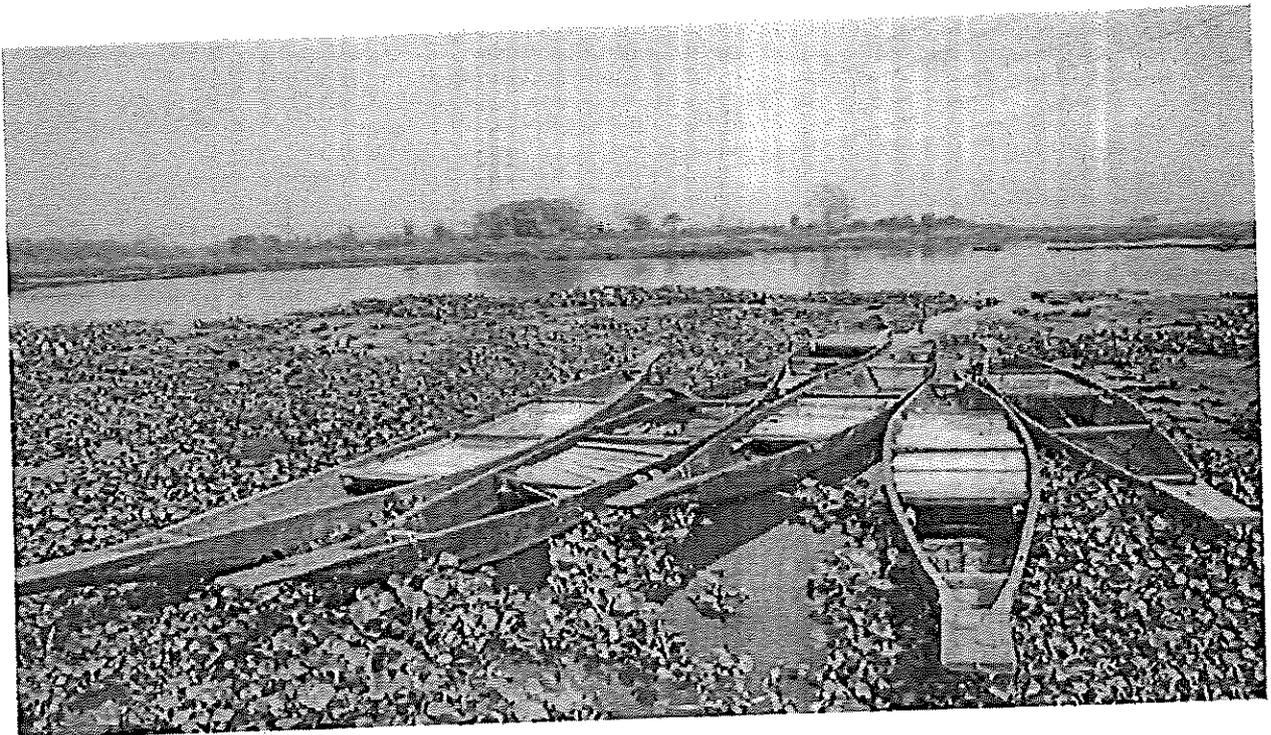
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GUWAHATI

Unchecked urbanisation pushing Deepor Beel into environment crisis: Experts

Unauthorized settlements, illegal dumping grounds & unrestricted dumping of solid waste have significantly reduced the wetland size & quality

By Kumkum Dey - 22 Apr 2025 11:46 AM



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Guwahati has seen two decades of runaway expansion. What was a small, scenic town is now a labyrinth city. As much as the growth has spurred infrastructural development and economic activity, it has come at the cost of massive environmental degradation. Wetlands and green belts, which were once plentiful in the city, are being gradually overtaken by buildings, roads, and dumps.

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Deepor Beel is perhaps the biggest victim of this uncontrolled development. Unauthorized settlements, illegal dumping grounds, and unrestricted dumping of solid waste have reduced the wetland size and quality by a large extent. Extending to over 40 square kilometers at some stage, the lake has contracted to less than half its former extent.

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“Unchecked urbanization has pushed Deepor Beel into an environmental crisis,” cautions Dr Anamika Goswami, environmental scientist from Guwahati. “If we don’t wake up now, we will lose not just a wetland but an entire ecosystem that supports hundreds of species and provides essential services to the city.”

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A file image of Deepor Beel (AT Photo)

Loss of biodiversity: Deepor Beel was a sanctuary for over 200 species of birds, migratory and non-migratory, like the Spot-billed Pelican, Lesser Adjutant Stork, and the Greater Adjutant. It also supported a vibrant aquatic life and also had the nesting site of several fish and amphibians.

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"The water is no longer clean. The fish are vanishing, and our revenues are decreasing annually," says Raju Das, a fisherman residing close to Deepor Beel. "The construction and garbage have reduced the beel's size, and the birds no longer visit like they used to."

Wetlands like Deepor Beel are not just peaceful bird-watchers' paradises but are part and parcel of urban ecology. They act as natural flood buffers, absorbing monsoon excess water. They recharge groundwater, filter contaminants, and stabilize microclimates.

As Deepor Beel declines, these critical roles are being lost. Guwahati, itself prone to flash floods, is becoming increasingly vulnerable. Areas around the beel that remained dry during heavy rainfall now get waterlogged for days. The shrinking wetland has left the area without a top-notch bulwark against natural calamities.

"Modern flooding we are witnessing is the direct consequence of what we've done to wetlands," remarks Dr Partha Bordoloi, a hydrologist with Gauhati University. "If natural drainage mechanisms get destroyed, there's nowhere for the water to go. Deepor Beel was our sponge – it used to soak excess water. Now, it's contracting, and we're experiencing the consequences."

Solid Waste Dumping: One of the most striking causes of the deterioration of the wetland is the Boragaon landfill nearby. In spite of repeated court orders and public demonstrations, tipping of municipal garbage within the beel and in its proximity goes on unchecked. The leachate from the trash seeps into the water, turning once-clear wetlands into poisonous cesspools.

The fact that there's a dump for waste in close proximity to a Ramsar site isn't only an environmental crime – it's a crime against nature. Toxic waste from this dump has already altered the wetland's pH levels, destroyed aquatic ecosystems, and poses a real health hazard to people in the area.



Garbage and solid waste are often dumped in the wetland (AT Photo)

“Every monsoon, the trash from the dump finds its way into the beel. It’s unfortunate that we’re letting this happen to such a precious ecosystem,” says environmentalist Priya Das.

Furthermore, all urban development work in Guwahati has to be dictated by environmental analysis studies, rather than by motive for profit. Natural drainage systems and green infrastructure need to come first – not a last-minute nicety.

“We must treat Deepor Beel as the treasure that it is,” insists Dr Goswami. “This is not just a question of fish or birds –it’s about the health of our city, our people, and our future.”

Deepor Beel stands at the juncture: if we continue to turn a blind eye to the warning signs and allow urbanization to destroy the very ecosystems that sustain us, the devastation will be apocalyptic– not only for wildlife, but for humans as well. Guwahati must choose a path of sustainable development, where wetlands are not destroyed and nature is brought into urban planning. Time is fast running out. But through awareness, will, and common action, Deepor Beel may still be preserved – and the environmental balance of our region restored in the bargain.

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