The Need to Safeguard Wetlands

The extraordinary sight of a lake in Bengaluru on fire, with a massive plume of smoke that could be seen from afar, is a warning sign that urban environments are crashing under the weight of official indifference.

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What happened to wetlands in Bengaluru?

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- No longer the city of lakes and famed gardens, it has **lost an estimated 79% of water bodies and 80% of its tree cover from the baseline year of 1973.**
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- Successive governments in the State have ignored the rampant encroachment of lake beds and catchment areas for commercial exploitation, and the pollution caused by sewage, industrial effluents and garbage, which contributed to the blaze on **Bellandur lake.**
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- The neglect is deliberate, since some of the finest urban ecologists in the city have been warning that government inaction is turning Bengaluru into an unliveable mess.
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What should the government do?

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- It is time the State government took note of the several expert recommendations that have been made, including those of the Centre for Ecological Sciences of the Indian Institute of Science.
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- The priority, clearly, is to end pollution outfalls into the water bodies, which will help revive them to an acceptable state of health.
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- Identifying all surviving wetlands and demarcating them using digital and physical mapping will help communities monitor encroachments, while

removal of land-grabbers and restoration of interconnecting channels is crucial to avoid future flooding events.
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What the reports say?

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- Loss of natural wetlands is an ongoing catastrophe in India.
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- A decade ago, when the **Salim Ali Centre for Ornithology and Natural History** released a conservation atlas for all States using space applications, it reported the tragic fact that **38% of wetlands had already been lost nationally; and shockingly, in some districts only 12% survived.**
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- Moreover, research studies show that the concentration of heavy metals in such sites is leading to bioaccumulation, thus entering the plants and animals that ultimately form part of people's food.
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- The government should worry not just Bengaluru's residents, for instance, that soil scientists have found higher levels of cadmium in green vegetables grown using water from Bellandur.
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Way ahead:

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- The Centre has since issued rules for conservation and management, and chosen 115 water bodies in 24 States for protection support, but this is obviously too little.
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- More broadly, the collapse of environmental management because of multiple, disjointed agencies achieving little collectively and legal protections remaining unimplemented pose a serious threat to public health.
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- Every city needs a single lake protection authority. India's worsening air quality is now well documented, and most of its wetlands are severely polluted.
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- Citizens must assert themselves to stop this risky course.

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Source: The Hindu

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