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Govt joins project to protect lake

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KOLKATA: Santragachi jheel, which was cleaned up last year by locals and NGOs after TOI reported of its pitiable condition, has finally drawn the attention of the state environment department. The latter has now joined hands with Nature Mates Nature Club, an NGO, and the Institute of Wetland Management and Ecological Design to start off a project to conserve and protect the lake.

"We are planning to start off with the project as soon as possible, preferably before the onset of winter. According to initial estimates, around Rs 30 lakh will be required for the project. The detail project report has been prepared and work can start off as soon as we can get the funds," said a senior environment department official.

Officials said that not only will the bio-diversity and bird habitat of the lake be conserved, the water will be regularly cleaned for three years. The surrounding sewerage and drainage system will also be revamped and the trees surrounding it will be protected.

The lake, which is one of the prime waterbodies located near the city, attracts several migratory birds during winter. Spreading over 1,375,000 square feet, the jheel attracts over 4,000 migratory winter birds like Whistling Ducks, Ferruginous Pochards, Comb Ducks and Northern Pintails between December and February.

Last year, TOI had run a campaign highlighting the pathetic condition of the lake, which was full of hyacinth due to lack of upkeep and its condition was steadily deteriorating. The authorities who were responsible for its upkeep and maintenance did not clean the water. Several NGOs and even a few corporate houses had also come forward to clean up the hyacinth, just about in time before the arrival of the birds.

"The condition of the lake is in a presentable condition now for migratory birds to come in," said Mudar Patherya, an environment activist who had also done his bit last year to clean up the lake.

"After we had cleaned up the lake last year, we had come up with a proposal to draw up a chart and gather information on the migratory birds that flock to the jheel. For instance, we have no idea where the birds are going or, say, what is the similarity of the Santragachi jheel with other waterbodies. The plan also includes protecting the trees surrounding the lake," said Arjan Basu Roy, secretary of Nature Mates Nature Club.

Apart from conserving the biodiversity of Santragachi jheel, the environment department is also working to protect the East Kolkata wetlands. A draft policy on wetland preservation has been framed and has been submitted to the department for it to come up with a final wetland preservation policy. The draft policy mentions the need to have a state wetland act that will help the authorities to have a proper direction to save and protect the wetlands.

Senior environment department officers held a meeting with finance department officials recently, asking the latter to release about Rs 13 crore for various projects and administrative upkeep, including developing the wetlands and conserving its biodiversity.