

**PROTECTION AND RESTORATION OF INDIA'S COASTLINE**

The coastal environment plays a vital role in India's economy by virtue of the resources, productive habitats, and rich biodiversity. India's coastline stretches about 7500 km and supports almost 30% of its human population.

Coastal fisheries are immensely important, both economically and in terms of environmental health. In India they provide essential livelihoods and shape the local cultures of a large share of the population. For the impoverished, they supply a significant quantity of basic free food. India continues to be the 7<sup>th</sup> largest fishing nation in the world.

Coastal vegetation habitats, such as mangrove forests, serve as buffers to protect the shore line from wind generated storms and support coastal ecology. It is an important part of a local ecosystem as it strongly modulates land-ocean interactions and the mixture of fresh water and salt water in estuaries provides many nutrients for marine life. Salt marshes and beaches also support a diversity of plants, animals, and insects crucial to the food chain.

The coastal beaches prevent salt water intrusion into the ground water which is used for drinking water and agriculture and therefore fundamental for our water and food security.

The coast is a crucial frontier and must be defended against invaders, smugglers, and illegal migrants.

Coastal beaches if properly maintained not only offer a rich and important natural environment but also promote sustainable economic development such as ports and tourism which generates significant source of foreign exchange.

**THE CRISIS:** In the past decade, the degradation of the Indian coastline has reached alarming proportions, closely reflecting the urban population explosion, rapid and unplanned urbanization of coastal cities and towns, over exploitation of marine and coastal resources, dumping of industrial and toxic wastes and coastal erosion due to man-made structures such as ports, harbors, seawalls, and groynes. According to the ADB and ICMAM reports, about 1,500 km or 26% of the mainland coastline faces serious erosion and much of the coastline is actively retreating thus posing a grave danger to the integrity and safety of the mainland making it significantly more vulnerable to natural disasters. The absence of interdepartmental and centre-state coordination is the biggest obstacle to fostering a sustainable coastal zone management strategy. Vision and sensitive development can prevent turning these invaluable natural resources into biological and economic wastelands. This would then enhance economic, social, cultural and ecological prosperity.

The coastal areas are also prone to natural disasters. India has been identified as one of the 27 countries most vulnerable to the impacts of global warming related accelerated sea level rise (UNEP, 1989), which threatens coastal habitat as a result of human influence.

**The coastline of India is both a precious natural resource and an important economic asset. Once the coastline is destroyed, it may be impossible to fully restore either the coastal ecology or the lost livelihoods. Immediate action is needed to protect and restore this irreplaceable national treasure and in redirecting coastal development for a sustainable future.**

**RECOMMENDATIONS:**

- 1. Evolve a National Policy** for the conservation and restoration of the entire coast of India
  - Conduct comprehensive scientific and environmental studies of coastal geomorphology, ecosystem habitation, and effects of development on coastal zones.
  - Consult with coastal communities concerning their economic needs and protection of their environmental assets.
  - Map the various public policy priorities, such as protection of the coastal ecology, livelihoods of coastal communities, economic development, security etc.
  - Incorporate the costs of environmental services and damages (and their repairs) directly into the prices of the goods, services or activities which cause them, thereby contributing to the implementation of the “Polluter Pays” principle.
  - Prescribe high penalties for violations by way of fines and imprisonment whether it is by an individual, a company or the State under the “Coastal Protection Act”, in line with the “Wildlife Protection Act”.
  - Involve the coastal communities to create ownership, similar to the “Forest Rights Act”.
  - Freeze State Governments from taking any ad hoc decisions on coastal development.
  
- 2. Implement the National Policy** in letter and spirit through the coordination of Centre, State, and Coastal communities.
  - Set up a Task Force at the Centre which should include experts in the various fields, for effective enforcement.
  - Set up Cells at the local level with State officials, Coastal communities and NGOs for monitoring the coastline.
  - Review minutes of regular meetings and reports of time bound action taken.
  - Publicise violations through media.
  
- 3. Fund allocation** by the Government and Funding agencies for ongoing:
  - Scientific studies to strengthen the knowledge base of coastal eco-systems and to understand the impacts on the coast due to man-made interventions.
  - Conduct awareness programs for the coastal communities and students on the ecological, social, cultural and economic importance of the coast and the impacts on it due to man-made interventions such as construction, mining, dumping of wastes and effluents, etc.
  - Monitoring of the coastline by research institutes and coastal communities.
  - Restoration of the coastline based on comprehensive scientific studies.
  
- 4. Declare as “Disasters”** coastal areas which are damaged and stop any further development until that area is restored.