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A safety belt under siege

Besides being home to rare species, the mangrove forests of Andhra have protected coastal communities from cyclones. Unfortunately, they could soon disappear, reports SYED AKBAR

A totally rusted notice board outside the village of Nagayalanka, which lies 80 km from Vijayawada, says it all. "Welcome to Krishna Wildlife Sanctuary, the habitat of lovely mangrove forests," it says.

"The decrepit signboard typifies all that is wrong with this wildlife sanctuary perched picturesquely on the estuary of the Krishna river. The sanctuary harbours unique mangrove vegetation besides salt water crocodiles, fishing cats and others, besides endangered animal species like dolphins and dugongs (sea cows).

But now most of this mangrove sanctuary is degraded, with vast stretches of forest land having been converted into fish or prawn ponds. Cattle can be spotted all over, freely grazing in the area and denuding the sanctuary further. Hardly 10 per cent of the 200 sq km sanctuary now has any greenery worth the name. The rest has been rendered into barren, sandy patches.

Rues a senior forest official, "The mangrove vegetation was so thick a couple of decades ago that we used to auction the wood every alternate year. But today we do not even find enough seedlings to take up the regeneration programme."

Besides, though it is a notified wildlife sanctuary, it has no security worth the name and poaching is known to be quite rampant in the area. The Andhra Pradesh Government and the local people are both to blame for the slow death of these unique forests.

The degradation started soon after a major portion of the vegetation was washed away in the tidal wave that swept the south Andhra

coast in November 1977. What certainly added to the problem was the unchecked poaching that went on. All the hue and cry by environmentalists to save mangroves from extinction fell on deaf ears. One can still find people carrying away logs of wood for firewood after having felled the mangrove shrubs.

By the time the Government did start listening to ecologists, much of the damage had been done.

Finally, in 1992, the entire estuary of Krishna was declared a wildlife sanctuary to protect the mangroves. Six years later, the noti-

fication doesn't seem to have made a difference. Even the nursery set up by the Government in Nali hamlet to take up artificial afforestation of mangroves failed this year.

However, even as the sanctuary continues to suffer for want of protection, plans are afoot to denotify as much as three hectares of the mangrove forest in Machilipatnam to set up a fishing harbour. The Central Government had earlier denotified thousands of hectares of mangrove-rich reserve forest lands near Machilipatnam and Nizampatnam.

If these mangroves go, so will the thousands of life forms which thrive in these forests known to have high salinity fluctuations. The wildlife here include insects, molluscs, fish, some mammals, amphibians, reptiles and even microscopic

checking poaching.

They have also called for village-protection forces to look after the mangroves, suggesting that the volunteers employed in such initiatives should be paid by the Government.

Environmental education can go a long way because if mangrove trees are felled recklessly, it is the people living along the seacoast who will suffer the most. The mangroves protect the coastline from erosion and help reclaim land from the sea. They also act as shelter belts and protect inland coastal villages from tidal waves, besides acting as a guard against cyclones.

The mangroves also cycle their own vegetation and transport nutrients from land to sea, which is very important for the survival of economically important fish like shrimps and prawns. They provide timber for boat building, bark for

ECO VIGIL



The mangroves with their breathing roots protruding out. Express photo by Ch VS Vijayabhaskar

plankton. Birds like pond herons, reef herons, sand pipers, flamingoes, sea gulls, little egrets, pied kingfisher and about a hundred other species as well nest in these mangroves. They also contain about two dozen families and 70 species of plants. Felling the mangroves will deprive the birds and animals that have lived here over the centuries of their habitation and

tanning and seedlings for food. They also accumulate and stabilise sediments and build up and extend coastal soils.

What's more, with their unique flora and fauna spread out against the backdrop of a vast expanse of azure blue seawater, the mangroves are a nature lover's paradise. Such forests survive only in marshy soils found mostly in the mouth of rivers,

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sheltered shores, tidal creeks, backwaters, lagoons and mud flats. Since these are scattered, poachers encroach upon them regularly.

In Andhra Pradesh, mangroves occur in the estuaries of the Krishna and Godavari rivers and cover an area of about 580 sq km, or an estimated nine per cent of the local forest area. Besides the Krishna sanctuary, mangroves are available at the Coringa Wildlife Sanctuary in East Godavari district.

The Chandrababu Naidu Government, given its dwindling mangrove forest reserves, must now shake itself from slumber to save this important resource. Otherwise it may just be too late.

might even lead to their extinction.

Environment activists have suggested that as most of the villagers who violate the Wildlife Act are from the poorer sections of society, the Government should introduce welfare measures to reduce the dependence of people living in and around the mangrove sanctuaries on the forests.

Activists also believe that the setting up of education centres to teach environmental issues and to create awareness among the local people about the fragile ecosystem they inhabit and the need to conserve it, would go a long way in