

The Hindu, Chennai, 15 Mar 2008

Stress on urban natural resources conservation

Special Correspondent

CHENNAI India needs to conserve urban natural resources to prevent the quality of life in cities deteriorating and to stem the impact this has on driving climate change, a group of social scientists, planners, architects and activists gathered at IIT Madras agreed.

The challenge ahead, they acknowledged, is how to change the land grab mindset that pervades decision-making at government, company and individual levels.

Chennai's city planning efforts are illustrative of this attitude, Tara Murali of the Citizen Consumer and Civic Action Group said.

The few efforts to address (mostly southern) urban renewal in the city that have made it into the latest master plan will be undermined by the creation of a world class city outside the Chennai Metropolitan Development Authority, she suggested.

The pressure on natural resources in the city can be seen in many areas, but none so clearly as the wetland of Pallikaranai, if only because extensive data collection has been undertaken in the area,

said Jayashree Vencatesan of Care Earth.

Chennai, considered a water-poor city, has a natural water drainage and storage area in Pallikaranai, she said. But dammed up by bridges, hemmed in by roads, crowded out by the offices of organisations such as the National Institute of Oceanography and encroached upon by the giants of the IT industry, Chennai floods in the monsoons and suffers from water shortage in the summer.

Chennai is, by no means, the only city whose resources are being pinched. The River Yamuna no longer floods, said Vikram Soni of National Physical Laboratory, New Delhi.

If the Yamuna is allowed to flood the sand underneath the city could hold enough water to serve the city in the summer, he said, pointing out that while Shanghai invests \$5 million into recycling water, Delhi has this option almost free.

The first step, he said, in bringing about change is to create an archive of data on the resources remaining in India's cities. The next, he said, is to try to quantify that.