

# A citizen's movement to protect wetlands emerges in Jammu and Kashmir

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[Jammu & Kashmir's wetlands provide habitat for migratory birds and act as buffer zones during floods. Now, a citizen's movement to revive these wetlands and water bodies has gained momentum. Around 25 teams of citizens across Jammu & Kashmir have spurred into action over the past few months, cleaning water bodies in their neighbourhoods – from Dal lake, freshwater springs at Verinag, Chatlam wetlands and even Kausar Nag at an altitude of 13,000 feet above sea level.](#)

It was a cigarette butt that turned Tariq's life around. Tariq A. Patloo remembers the moment like it were yesterday. "I was taking a German tourist through one of our canals. He had a smoke but did not throw the cigarette out. 'It will poison the water' he remarked and kept it with him." That incident was the turning point for Patloo. The 50-year-old Hanji (an ethnic community of lake dwellers) took it upon himself to clean the heavily polluted Dal lake in Kashmir. Every other day, he takes his [shikara](#) (boat) and collects garbage accumulated on the surface of Dal overnight. Patloo says that the Dal is choking due to wrong policies. "Can you believe that there is no proper drainage system in Srinagar, everything goes into our water bodies, untreated?" Adding to that, he feels that haphazard construction around the lake has turned it into a concrete jungle. Apart from cleaning the lake, he has also been filing petitions and raising complaints to flag any encroachments on his beloved home – Dal. Two years ago, his then five-year-old daughter Jannat wanted to join him in his mission to save Dal lake. The duo has since made a habit of cleaning the lake, often treading the most polluted parts, picking plastic bags or bottles they see. They update their activities on a social media page to garner more citizens to get engaged with the protection of the lake. Jannat's endeavour was acknowledged on social media by the Prime Minister. The shy Jannat, now seven, tells us that she aims to become a scientist and invent a machine to clean her lake. *Tariq A. Patloo and Jannat on a cleaning drive in the heavily polluted Dal lake in Kashmir. Photo from Tariq A. Patloo.*

A study, published at the end of 2017, by researchers at the Department of Earth Sciences, University of Kashmir, observed that over the last five decades, nearly 20 wetlands have been lost to urban colonies in and around Srinagar city. In the Jhelum basin of Kashmir, the total area of the major wetlands (with area more than 25 ha) decreased from 288.96 sq. km. in 1972 to 266.45 sq. km. in 2013, noted the study. It was no surprise that the capital city bore the full brunt of floods in 2014, with habitations on both sides of Jhelum lying submerged for weeks. A grassroots movement is born Like Jannat, 22-year-old Parvaiz Yousuf also found his inspiration close to his home. "My house is just a few feet away from the Chatlam wetland in Pampore. While growing up, I was extremely fascinated by the lakhs of migratory birds that visited us." Currently pursuing his Masters in Zoology, Yousuf is also the Director of Wetland Research Centre in Pampore which supports research on wetland ecology. He shares, "Wetlands (where land and aquatic ecosystems meet) act as sink point for all the water flowing down the mountain but now the wetland cover in Kashmir had reduced to a large extent." He adds that unabated construction on wetlands and major railway projects on the marshlands across Jhelum have worsened the situation. "The 2014 floods were a wake-up call for the locals. If not for the four wetlands in Pampore, I think we would have also seen extensive damage in our region," says Yousuf. The floods brought increased awareness among the people on the need to protect wetlands and other water bodies in Kashmir. Environmental lawyer Nadeem Qadri wanted to capitalise this momentum to protect nature through a grassroots movement. In January this year, the Jammu & Kashmir Eco Watch, a voluntary environment group was created to bring together volunteers like Patloo and Yousuf on to a single platform to take up eco-initiatives to protect the wetlands, forests or lakes in their own neighbourhood. "We did not want to function like a corporate organisation. Jammu & Kashmir Eco Watch was conceived as a decentralised movement wherein every member is treated equally as a green ambassador. (L to R) Tariq A. Patloo, Jannat and Nadeem Qadri from Kashmir are trying to protect the state's wetlands and inspire others to join the movement. Illustration by Ghazal Qadri for Mongabay. Qadri is a Kashmiri born illustrator, currently living in Maryland, USA. Her work focuses on storytelling through comics and illustrations. Currently, the group has 25 functioning Eco Watch teams (across 23 districts of J&K and one each in Kargil and Leh). In the last few months, these teams have spurred into action, cleaning various water bodies – from freshwater springs at Verinag, Chatlam wetlands to a cleanliness drive at Kausar Nag at an altitude of 13,000 feet above sea level. Every awareness/cleanliness drive is recorded meticulously in their respective district Facebook pages. "The coronavirus (pandemic) has given us more time to look after our neighbourhood," says Yousuf, who spearheaded a cleanliness drive at Chatlam wetland. The district teams have hundreds of volunteers ranging from retired professionals, scientists to school students getting their hands dirty to protect the neighbourhood water bodies. Hydraulic engineering expert Ajaz Rasool who acts as the Chief Technical Advisor of Jammu & Kashmir Eco Watch told Mongabay-India that in the past, they have had individual groups to protect lakes like Dal and Wular. But now, with increased public awareness, more volunteers have joined the Eco Watch in each district. "Despite lockdown, people are eager to clean their local water bodies (following safety protocols) and being the technical advisor, I have been sharing the methodology for eco restoration of the different aquatic systems (river, springs, lakes etc). We discuss strategies on which catchment area is more yielding, how to remove weeds in springs, how to handle solid waste management in our wetlands etc.," he said. "People are now aware that we cannot lose our environmental assets anymore and they are proud of protecting it for their own sake." Apart from conducting regular cleanup drives for the last six months, Eco Watch volunteers have become "green intelligence" — "they are our eyes and ears when it comes to protecting the environment," shares Qadri. Rasool agrees. "There is a sense of empowerment, the volunteers do not allow any mafia to cut trees illegally or throw garbage into our water bodies." With Qadri's legal background, he facilitates legal recourse for the group. Eco Watch has over 15 lawyers who handle the legal petitions. Volunteers clean the Verinag spring in Kashmir. Photo from Verinag Eco Watch. Communities for conservation With both technical expertise and legal guidance, the Jammu & Kashmir Eco Watch is marching ahead. However, the crux of this initiative is the participation of local communities in conserving their regional water bodies and wetlands. Yousuf tells us that in the past, farmers traditionally would make a passage (known as Vyen Kadun in Kashmiri) in the peatland to enable the water to flow out to the Jhelum with ease. This kept the water from flooding the neighbouring farms. With urbanisation, this process died out. "I feel that this could have been a good flood mitigation strategy for the peat or wetlands," he said. Patloo too rues about how the local Hanjis were squarely blamed for the deterioration of Dal lake. "People who were illegally encroaching need to be punished but it is unfair to blame the entire community of lake dwellers. In fact, people depending on the lake for livelihood would harvest the lily pads to feed their livestock and kept weeds in check." Programmes like Eco Watch aim to put the onus back on the local communities to protect their own neighbourhood. "We have plans to establish 250 Eco-development committees across different districts to protect the wetlands. We want the local people to be in charge of conservation and management of these unique biodiversity hotspots," shares Qadri. "And it works," adds Yousuf. "More and more local students turn up to our open-air sessions of nature education programmes. Our cleanliness drives were a huge success despite lockdown restrictions. In fact, our Chatlam wetland reserve is easily one of the most well-maintained among the wetlands." Pampore, which saw the earliest of conservation interventions is already reaping results. The bar-headed geese was sighted here for the first time and several species like grey-headed swamphen, red-crested pochard, pheasant-tailed jacana, common coot and others have started breeding in good numbers. In between his awareness and cleanup programmes, you can catch Yousuf bird-watching with glee. "Sometimes, the place

you live in shapes who you are,” smiles Yousuf.

The bar-headed geese in Pampore wetlands. These habitats provide shelter to migratory birds, livelihood opportunities to people, and act as buffer zones during floods. Photo from Wetland Research Centre. First published by *Mongabay India* on 7 Oct. 2020