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ENVIRONMENT-PAKISTAN:
Save the Indus Plead Delta Folk

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KETI BANDAR, Sindh, Mar 16 (IPS) - "There was a time when we used to cast our nets into the river [Indus] and haul in no less than 400 to 500 ‘palla’ fish at one go," says 70-year-old Hamzo Jat.

Jat, who belongs to the small fishing village of Tippin comprising about 900 inhabitants, was not exaggerating. Most of his compatriots have similar stories to tell of a time of abundance within living memory.

According to the World Wildlife Fund- Pakistan, palla stock declined from approximately 2,000 metric tons in the 1980s to less than 200 metric tons presently. A marine variety, palla swims up from the Arabian Sea to spawn in the Indus river.

"Now even if you give me palla for free, I won’t eat it," said Jat. "It just does not taste the same."

But it is not just the palla fish that has lost its flavour and abundance. Life on the delta has been changing for the worse since the flow of fresh water from the Indus began to decline as result of irrigation projects upstream.

With salinity, caused by sea water intrusion, on the rise people have been moving inland in droves.

Mohammad Ali Shah of Fisherfolk Forum, a grassroots organisation, estimates that "the delta population of Keti Bandar, which stood at around 700,000 until a decade ago, has now been reduced to 150,000 as a result of sea intrusion and decreased flow of fresh water from the Indus."

Of the 42 settlements, 28 have already been inundated by sea. Tippin village falls in the Hajmaro creek of the Indus delta, in Keti Bandar, an 18th century port famous for its red rice export.

The Indus delta is the sixth largest in the world spanning approximately 600,000 hectares along the coast of Sindh province comprises 17 major creeks and innumerable minor ones and mud-flats. It has been declared a Ramsar Site and has a wildlife sanctuary.

The reduced flow in the delta is the direct result of diversion of the Indus waters by

irrigation barrages built upstream, mainly in the province of Punjab. The first one, the Sukkur barrage, was constructed in 1923-32 by the British.

But it was the construction of the Kotri barrage in 1955 and the Guddu barrage in 1962 that sounded the death knell for the delta.

Water scarcity is now a serious political issue between the Sindh and Punjab provinces. From the 170 maf (million acre feet) that Sindh received in the 1930s, the water available now is less than 10 maf below the Koti barrage.

However, for most of the year, there is no flow below Kotri and even the agreed 10 MAF is not supplied. This has also resulted in a reduction in silt from 100 million tons to 30 million tons downstream of Kotri over the last decade.

The rich silt deposits brought down by the river were the main factor behind the fertility of the area along the banks that once supported thriving agriculture.

The waters of the Indus area also a major cause of friction between Pakistan and India which share the waters of the river and its five tributaries, under the World Bank-mediated Indus River Treaty of 1960.

Estimates by the International Water Management Institute indicate that Pakistan is among the 17 countries that are likely to face the most severe water scarcity by 2025.

Ayub Dablo, another fisherman, swears that if the Indus had continued flowing uninterrupted, like it once did and watered the delta, Pakistan would not have been importing grain. He is among the millions of people whose forefathers settled in the Indus delta centuries ago.

Despite the salinity and the danger of cyclones and tsunamis due to reduced mangrove cover, Dablo refuses to leave. "This is where I was born and this is where I will die," he says stubbornly.

This globally acclaimed wetland has now become an example of callous human intervention in nature. The devastation is manifested in reduced mangrove cover, decline in fish stocks and swathes of agricultural land turning infertile and unfit for grazing cattle.

"If the sea level rises and if the sea intrusion continues at this pace, the Keti Bundar will shift further up by the next decade. It would then be the fourth time in 70 years," predicts Zahid Hussain Jalbani, site manager for WWF.

Any hope that the Indus delta will continue to sustain human populations in the future depends on initiatives to arrest environment degradation such as the one by WWF which has vision to see "mankind coexisting with nature in complete harmony..."

The first five-year ‘Indus for all programme’ phase was initiated in 2008 to salvage the man-made and natural ravages wrought on the delta and, luckily for people like Jat, Tippin village seemed to fit in perfectly.

Surrounded by sea-water, the biggest problem for the people of Tippin faced was lack of

potable water.

"We calculated that they paid more than the city dwellers living in posh localities, on an average Rs 1,500 (18.75 US dollars) per month, and this did not include the fuel used to run the boat or the time consumed," pointed out Jalbani.

WWF decided to provide them with water at their doorstep.

"We deemed it a basic human right and provided them with a boat that would carry 16,000 litres of water for four villages, including Tippin," said Mustafa Talpur, who supervised the project in its initial stage.

The WWF also installed plastic storage tanks with a capacity of 4,000 lt in each village. The villagers buy whatever quantity they need by paying a nominal amount. The money collected is used for operation and maintenance of the boat.

Last month, the WWF constructed a huge reservoir to store 10,000 -12,000 lt near the jetty and fitted it with a sand filter. "Apart from these people getting cleaner water, it saved them the fuel and time to go to the city to fetch water in tankers.''

Tippin now has a one-room school accommodating about 24 children - 18 of them girls. "To break the vicious cycle of poverty, and to bring about change, we thought we needed to start with the children," explained Jalbani.

This may be just a drop in the ocean as there are about 100 kids of school-going age. "But it's a start nevertheless," says Jalbani enthusiastically.

To provide the school with electricity, the WWF has set up 200-watt solar panels capable of running two fans, three energy saver bulbs and one computer.

Because villages on the creek are hard to access it is costly to run in power cables from the main electricity line, they have an incentive to look for cheap alternate energy sources.

Apart from the solar panels, WWF decided to install windmills. Two 500 watt wind turbines, each costing Rs 160,000 (2,000 dollars), takes care of basic lighting needs. The villagers pay Rs 50 (0.62 dollars) each, per month, for electricity supply.

To be able to see after sunset has already brought a lifestyle change in the village. "I never knew there was life after dark," said Haleema happily. ''Now women often sit and chat till late in the night and do embroidery together. It's nice to unwind after a day's work."

But these are considered stopgap measures that will do little to prevent seawater ingress and the steady desertification of the Indus delta.

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