

## Fight of the flamingos for survival in the Navi Mumbai wetlands

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### Abstract

Tens of thousands of flamingos congregate annually in Talawe Wetlands, in Navi Mumbai on India's west coast. These annual visitors comprise of lesser and greater flamingos, the two species that migrate within India. With India's coronavirus lockdown, this year saw a 25% increase in numbers of these migratory birds. Bombay Natural History Society (BNHS), a pan-India wildlife research organisation, estimated that numbers this year may be more than 150000 birds compared to the 134000 counted last year. Unfortunately, these wetlands, the habitat of the flamingos, are in danger of being taken over for development for a residential complex and a golf course by the City and Industrial Development Corporation (CIDCO). Citizens of the area and city have been fighting to protect the wetlands.

### Resumen

Decenas de miles de flamencos se congregan anualmente en los humedales de Talawe, Navi Mumbai, en la costa oeste de la India. Estos visitantes anuales son las especies flamenco común (*Phoenicopterus roseus*) y flamenco enano, (*Phoeniconaias minor*) las dos especies que migran a la India. Con el encierro por coronavirus en India, este año se registró un aumento del 25% en el número de estas aves migratorias. La Sociedad de Historia Natural de Bombay (BNHS), una organización de investigación de la vida silvestre de la India, estimó que los números de este año pueden ser más de 150.000 en comparación con los 134.000 contadas el año pasado. Pero estos humedales, el hábitat de los flamencos, están en peligro de ser tomados para el desarrollo de un complejo residencial y un campo de golf por la Corporación de Desarrollo Industrial y Municipal (CIDCO). Los ciudadanos de la zona y la ciudad han estado luchando para protegerlos.

### Résumé

Des dizaines de milliers de flamants roses se rassemblent chaque année dans les zones humides de Talawe, à Navi Mumbai, sur la côte ouest de l'Inde. Ces visiteurs annuels comprennent des flamants nain et rose, les deux espèces qui migrent en Inde. Avec le confinement dû au coronavirus en Inde, cette année a vu une augmentation de 25% du nombre de ces oiseaux migrants. La Bombay Natural History Society (BNHS), une organisation pan-indienne de recherche sur la faune, a estimé que les chiffres de cette année pourraient être supérieurs à 150000 par rapport aux 134000 recensés l'année dernière. Mais ces zones humides, l'habitat des flamants, risquent d'être détruites pour l'aménagement d'un complexe résidentiel et d'un terrain de golf par la City and Industrial Development Corporation (CIDCO). Les citoyens de la région et de la ville se battent pour les protéger.

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### Introduction

The wetland areas around Navi Mumbai, on India's west coast, attract huge flocks of

flamingos, both lesser (*Phoeniconaias minor*) and greater (*Phoenicopterus roseus*), see Figure 1. During the 2020 Covid-19 pandemic, with people at home and remaining more in their local area, it appeared as if the birds were more evident to those living and working around these wetlands. Flamingo numbers also increased during the Covid-19 lockdown, to around 150000 birds according to census by the BNHS, suggesting that a lack of human activity has been beneficial to the habits of the

flamingos around Navi Mumbai. Whilst this spectacle was enjoyed by many, behind the scenes, work and activism by a dedicated community of flamingo-lovers and environmentalists is attempting to conserve this spectacle of birds from long-term damage to the wetlands that are so important for them.

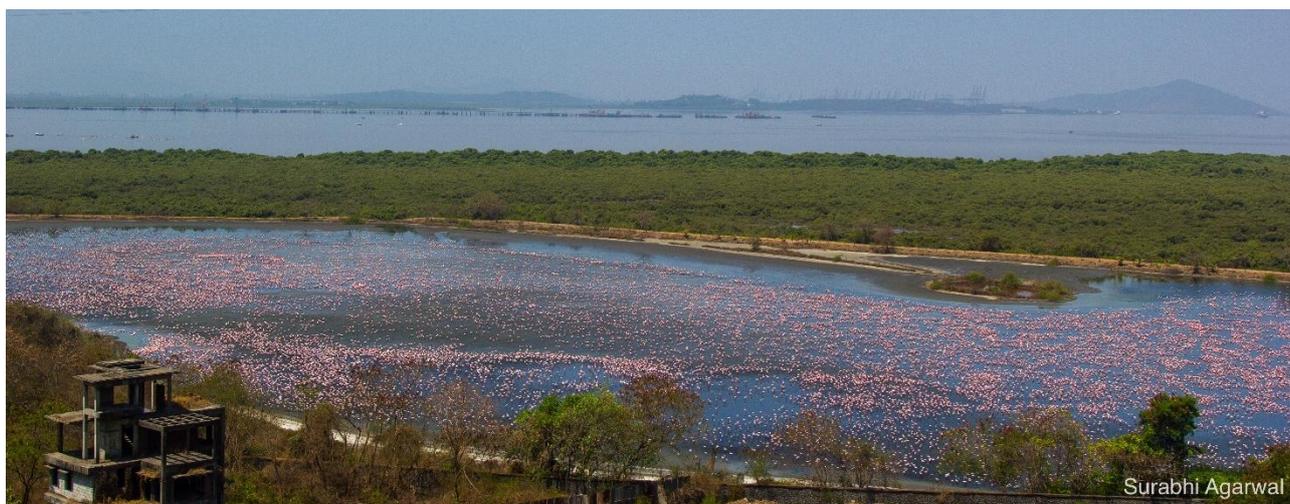


Figure 1: Flamingo flocks in the wetlands that exist around the city of Navi Mumbai

### The threat

It was in the summer of 2016 when a group of workers descended overnight to begin hacking mangroves when people living in the vicinity approached them to stop work and started filming the activities, they immediately stopped the work but refused to tell the people who had assigned them on the task. Alarm bells went up and citizens of the area Sunil and Shruti Agarwal filed a complaint at the nearest police station of NRI Coastal Police Station, Navi Mumbai. Everything went silent, no arrests were made, but one morning in October 2017 everyone was shocked to see excavator machines digging and creating a boundary and fences around the mangrove habitats. The concerned citizens in the vicinity came together to fight for the environment.

The group members started sharing pictures and videos of these activities from the towers

around the area. It became clear that the intention was to destroy the 800 trees. On further digging, the residents found out that they had a letter stating that they are soil testing but for that as well the permission was not in place. But in the name of soil testing, they were creating havoc. The residents also found out that the government had, without consulting the adjoining communities, gotten permission to change the land use from a no-development zone to a regional park zone and residential zone.

Complaints were filed with the wetland committee as well as with the local police station, and various other authorities and the destruction was halted. These aware citizens stood victorious, but unsatisfied as a lot of damage had already been done. The soil dumped in the wetland had not been removed.

### **Court battle**

In March 2018, Sunil Agarwal filed a Public Interest Litigation in the Bombay High Court. The Court ordered the removal of the dumped soil and in November 2018, the final High Court order came in favour of the citizens and directed the state government to protect and preserve mangroves, wetlands and lakes of the city.

The Court also said that the destruction of water bodies and mangroves will be a violation of fundamental rights under Article 21 of the Constitution of India. This victory instilled confidence in the local community, who began to increasingly spread awareness about mangroves and wetlands. *"We are delighted with this decision, but our fight doesn't end here. People need to be vigilant, report destruction and question authorities without shying away or being scared. Permissions must be challenged if they are violative of environmental laws"* said Sunil Agarwal.

### **Community involvement**

People took note of any further act of destruction and systematic burning of mangroves and reported them to authorities. There were events such as marathons, nature trails and awareness walks to expand this community of aware citizens, extending it beyond the immediate locality. The citizens continued to fight and work towards a more permanent solution to prevent destructive incidences in the future, while on the legal front, the Supreme court is now hearing the case and it will determine who will win, CIDCO or the flamingos and the citizens fighting for the good of the natural environment.

An affidavit submitted by Maharashtra Coastal Zone Management Authority (MCZMA) in court had revealed that what enabled the approval of this project of residential towers and golf course was a statement by The City and Industrial Development Corporation (CIDCO) that there are no wetlands in the area. *"Public money and time are being drained in these futile battles of land grab under the garb of development. And what are the consequences faced by those responsible for this? Stringent action must be taken to dissuade other authorities from indulging in such lies in the future"* said Shruti Agarwal.

### Proposed flamingo sanctuary

There is a simple solution, a proposed flamingo sanctuary, in the interest of the birds, the people and the wider environment of the area. Despite a promise made by the state environment minister in January 2020, and follow-up emails from many concerned citizens and environmentalists, such as Bittu Sehgal and Sunjoy Monga, there has been no action from the CIDCO MD. Observations of the birds by ornithologists, environmentalists and local people have shown the diverse array of behaviours performed by the flamingos in these wetlands, including group courtship display (Figure 2). Consequently, the wetlands provide an important habitat for the flamingos, being of good enough quality to facilitate the performance of numerous behaviours important to the flamingo annual cycle and life history stages.



*Figure 2: Displaying lesser flamingos in the Navi Mumbai wetlands. The performance of this group courtship display highlights the importance of these wetlands to the birds' annual cycle.*

### **Consequences**

But why is it so important to save this parcel of land? Why go to all these lengths? Not only are these 80 ha of wetlands and mangroves a habitat to rich biodiversity, but they also play a crucial role in protecting our shoreline from floods. While the infamous Mumbai floods wash away the city, these mangroves stand guarding Navi Mumbai and ensuring a peaceful night's sleep for its residents.

The mangroves also play an important role in carbon removal as they are the most carbon-dense ecosystems in the world. If protected, mangroves act as long-term carbon sinks to this world otherwise awash with carbon emissions.

Another very important concern is that of passenger safety. A report by BNHS shows that if the birds lose their habitat, they will possibly move north. Moving North means going closer to the new airport that is coming up. This poses a huge risk to flights and passenger safety and must not be overlooked.

### **A step towards victory**

The site of the proposed golf course was sold to a private company by a state agency, the CIDCO of Maharashtra, after assuring the coastal zone management authority that it was not a wetland. On 18<sup>th</sup> June 2020, the Maharashtra Forest Department approved and published an official document showing

six ecologically sensitive areas in the Mumbai Metropolitan Region (MMR) as wetlands. This includes Training Ship Chanakya (13 ha) and NRI Complex (19 ha) in Navi Mumbai, the site of the proposed golf course and residential project.

The areas have been listed as 'satellite wetlands that need to be protected within a 50km radius of Thane Creek Flamingo Sanctuary (TCFS).' This is the first time the state has also officially declared its intent to protect these sites as conservation reserves.

*"Protecting these wetlands will help us achieve our sustainable development goals and commitments to the global community on Central Asian Flyway that the Prime Minister had announced during the Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species (CMS COP 13) in Gandhinagar in February"* said Deepak Apte, director, BNHS to the Hindustani Times.

*"They are vital migratory bird habitats and their protection is crucial from the air safety point of view for the Navi Mumbai International Airport."* This development shakes the basis of approval of the project as it now sits on an untruth that these areas are not wetlands. It exposes the truth that the citizen activists of this area have been promoting for so many years: these are important wetlands that must be protected, for flamingos, for other wildlife and for people too.