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Calamitous decline of birds at Keenjhar Lake

By M. Iqbal Khwaja

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THATTA: The number of birds in and around Keenjhar Lake has dropped to a mere 1,750 from 50,000-150,000 in 1970, according to a recent survey. Authorities point to unabated hunting as the major cause of the decline.

According to surveys conducted by the WWF, there were 13,000 birds residing in the area during the winter of 2007. In January 2008, the figure dropped to 7,000, in November and December the figure declined further to 4,000 and 2,200 birds, respectively and the latest figure of January 2009 was 1,750, said the survey.

The survey stated that unabated hunting, particularly through hanging nets and shooting, loss of habitat, loss of feeding grounds, an increase in the water level, unrestricted boat traffic and unsustainable fishing practices were behind the problem.

'If not addressed immediately, the situation will lead us to a point when we will be searching for catching a glimpse of beautiful birds in the area but will not find any,' said the programme coordinator of the Indus for All Programme, Nasir Ali Panhwar.

Dr Ghulam Akbar, Regional Director of WWF said the Keenjhar Lake was an important breeding, wintering and staging area for a wide variety of terrestrial and migratory birds.

Around 65 species of waterfowl besides many other species, including night heron, cotton teal, pheasant tailed jacana, purple moor hen and some passerines were found on the lake, he said.

The lake which once used to be famous for birds had lost this status. The cotton teal had disappeared in recent years and had not been seen on the lake for a few years while the population of many other birds was on fast decline for the past many years due to a number of reasons, he said.

'Gone are the days when there used to be hundreds of thousands of birds in the lake during winter,' said Jehangir Durrani who is working in the area with Indus for All Programme as natural resource management officer.

He emphasised that the situation could be improved with collective efforts by concerned government departments and non-governmental organisations.

Keenjhar Lake, situated at a distance of 113km from Karachi and about 20km to the north and north-east of Thatta, is a freshwater lake, spread over 145 square km.

The lake was formed by the union of two lakes, Sonehri and Keenjhar, through construction of an embankment on their eastern side in 1950.

The lake, a wetland area of great ecological, biological and economic significance, was declared a Wildlife Sanctuary in 1977 under the Sindh Wildlife Protection Ordinance 1972 and designated as Ramsar site in 1976.