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## Campaign launched to protect Indus Delta mangroves

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KARACHI • In what is being viewed as a significant move, the government in Pakistan's Sindh province has decided, in principle, to declare all mangroves in the Indus Delta protected under reference of a 1958 notification on mangrove forests without changing their ownership.

After a notification expected to be issued in a few weeks, the forest department will manage and work for the rehabilitation of mangroves that come under various organizations, including the Board of Revenue (BoR), Defence Housing Authority (DHA) and Karachi Port Trust (KPT).

Environmentalists have termed the decision a major step towards the conservation of mangrove forests, fast depleting due to various pressures, including salinisation of land caused by reduced flow of fresh water into the river and the sea, land reclamation, encroachments, heavy metal pollution and expansion of economic activities.

In a recent meeting presided over by chief secretary Fazlur Rehman, it was decided that the mangrove area in the Indus delta falling under the jurisdictions of different organisations would be declared protected and managed by the forest department while a committee comprising all stakeholders would be set up to suggest and develop strategies for conservation of mangroves.

The meeting, attended by all stakeholders including the officials of the KPT, Port Qasim Authority, DHA, Manora Cantonment Board, BoR and members of different NGOs working for the cause of conservation of nature, followed a visit of members of the senate's standing committee on environment to the area, which recommended that mangroves in the Indus delta be declared protected. Another follow-up meeting would be held in the next few weeks.

Commenting on the development, forest secretary Mushtaq Ali Memon said it was a significant initiative considering the importance of mangroves that served as nurseries for fish and shrimps and acted as natural barriers against storms and tsunamis.

Shedding light on the Sindh government's decision, WWF-Karachi head Dr Ghulam Akbar said the decision was a good omen. "The mangrove forest cover in the Indus delta has greatly decreased over the decades and one of the major reasons has been the lack of expertise and management on part of the different organisations that own the land.

The forest department has been keeping a fine record in the management of mangroves and it's a fact that mangroves are thriving only at places which are under the control of the forest department."

However, he said, the WWF had been pursuing the cause to have the entire area of Hawks Bay and Sandspit declared as 'nature reserve'.

"The whole area is a treasure trove of biodiversity. This includes 400 hectares of mangroves, swamps, salt pans, fishing grounds and nesting sites for two species of marine turtles that have been declared protected under the Sindh Wildlife Ordinance 1972.

These sites are also breeding grounds for several marine fish species

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and wintering grounds for thousands of migratory birds, besides home to coral species and a number of endemic plant species, including *Acacia nilotica* ssp *hemispherica*, which exists nowhere except along the Karachi coast.”

Syed Ghulam Qadir Shah, manager for conservation, Sindh, WWF, who was also one of the participants of the meeting, say their organisation had been working for the declaration of Hawks Bay/Sandspit as nature reserve for many years and the recent development was the result of the continued struggle on part of the bodies working for the conservation of nature.

“The first step was taken when the proposal of declaring Hawks Bay/Sandspit area as nature reserve was presented to the Sindh governor in 2003. The major outcome of this decision would be the legal protection of the mangrove area that comes under the KPT, BoR and DHA. The rest of the area is already under the forest department and hence protected.”

According to the Final Report of Vegetation Assessment 2008 by the WWF conducted under the Indus for All Programme, the most characteristic features of the delta are the mangrove swamps on vast mud flats formed by sediment deposited by the Indus river.

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