**[Drowning thirsty](https://www.dawn.com/news/1769035/drowning-thirsty)**

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AMONG the many paradoxes that this land of the pure has been grappling with, one stands out as particularly strange: Pakistan, despite being blessed with the mighty Indus river and some of the world’s largest glaciers, is ranked as the second-most water-stressed country globally. In the year 2022, one-third of the nation was submerged under floodwaters, yet the majority of urban centres, including Karachi, continued to suffer from chronic water shortages. This bewildering situation has created a cycle in which citizens alternately protest against the government for water scarcity or cry out for help with dewatering after urban floods caused by rainfall. The 18th-century Sufi poet Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai poem (in Sindhi) stands true for today’s Pakistan; “Only fools remain thirsty while sitting next to water.”

Last year, a staggering 33 million people, constituting 15 per cent of the country’s total population, were directly affected by the devastating floods. Ironically, an alarming 10m Pakistanis remain without access to clean drinking water while still submerged in the floodwater. Even more alarming is the estimate that by 2025, a mind-boggling 207m people will be facing an “absolute scarcity of water”.

With 38pc of Pakistan’s population residing in the cities, a figure expected to surpass 50pc by 2050, the perpetual cycle of water scarcity and urban flooding poses a daunting challenge. It begs the question of why we don’t capitalise on the water that naturally comes to our cities and towns. The solution lies in something simple yet effective — wetlands.

Pakistan is an Indus Valley country blessed with several rivers of different capacities. Changing courses thousands of times since its inception, the Indus has left depressions, dhoras, and even oxbow lakes in the plains of Punjab and Sindh. At least 200 depressions are spread out in the Indus delta region from district Badin to Dhabeji. These depressions can absorb almost all floodwaters upstream if the necessary measures are taken. The Punjab rivers also have similar old depressions spread out everywhere, which get recharged during the monsoons. Though real estate madness has occupied most of them, there are still places which can be utilised. For example, right in the middle of Lahore, the Ravi’s bed, starting from the Shahdara Reserve Forest to the shrine of Hazrat Gardezi, a 14-kilometre patch covering the 16th-century Kamran Baradari of Emperor Babar’s son Kamran, can be a great wetland. With lotus and water lilies, the place can be a tourism goldmine. Similarly, the detached 90-acre portion of the old Obhayo lagoon in Karachi along Mai Kolachi road and the 170-acre black water pond of Boat Basin can be rehabilitated and utilised for floodwater absorption, mangroves and ecotourism.

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By dedicating areas to wetlands, we can create natural reservoirs that harvest rainwater, store it and put it to beneficial use for drinking and recreational purposes. Such solutions only make sense when we shift our wealth paradigm from real estate and concrete to nature-based alternative riches.

Taking inspiration from Kolkata, where the East Kolkata Wetland treats over a billion litres of wastewater daily, we can harness the potential of the urban wetlands in Pakistan. These valuable ecosystems play a significant role in managing water resources, reducing flood risks and supporting biodiversity.

During COP13, the Ramsar Convention introduced the Wetland City Accreditation, which recognised 18 cities that have taken exceptional steps to safeguard their urban wetlands. Six of these cities are in China. Four each are in France and Korea. Even underdeveloped co­­untries like Sri Lanka and Tunisia are part of this accreditation.

The Indus Valley cities and towns like Multan, Sukkur, Larkana and Sehwan, and then the Jhelum and Chenab catchments, and run-off rivers such as the Ravi, Sutlej and Beas can serve as new wetlands for a new ecotourism hub and a biodiversity hotspot right in the middle of cities, including Lahore and Karachi. In a water-scarce city like Karachi, there are multiple places in the Lyari and Malir riverbeds where wetlands can sustain till the next monsoon, yielding biodiversity services. These urban wetlands will create a rich lake ecosystem with native aquatic plants such as water lilies, lotus and Typha elephantina. Utilising the monsoon run-off from India to create and sustain these wetlands will not only address water scarcity but also help in regulating temperatures, fostering tourism and protecting biodiversity.

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