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Deepor Beel Under Threat – Illegal Earth Cutting at Kalshila Wetland

16 March 2026

SUBJECTS COVERED**ENVIRONMENT****POLITY****CURATED & WRITTEN BY****Bharat Choudhary**

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Deepor Beel Under Threat — Illegal Earth Cutting at Kalshila Wetland

16 March 2026 · 6 min read

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✎ WHY IN NEWS

Organised illegal earth extraction by JCB excavators has been systematically destroying the **Kalshila wetland** in Guwahati — hydrologically connected to **Deepor Beel**, Assam’s only **Ramsar-designated wetland**. The activity defies a Gauhati High Court order, district prohibitory orders, and Assam Forest Department regulations, and has been recurring since 2021.

DEEPOP BEEL AND THE KALSHILA WETLAND CRISIS

The Immediate Threat

Since early February 2026, organised groups have been operating **JCB excavators at night** in the Kalshila wetland area (Satmile, Jalukbari, Guwahati) — extracting and commercially selling topsoil via dumper trucks. The operation violates:

Gauhati High Court prohibitory orders

Kamrup (Metro) district administration’s prohibitory orders

Assam Forest Department wetland protection regulations

Wetlands (Conservation and Management) Rules, 2017 under the Environment Protection Act

Environmental experts warn this dry-season excavation — recurring since 2021 — is progressively degrading the aquifer and wetland hydrology that feeds **Deepor Beel**.

About Deepor Beel

Deepor Beel (also written Dipor Bil) is a freshwater lake and wetland on the southwestern fringe of Guwahati city in **Kamrup (Metro) district, Assam**.

Attribute	Details
Ramsar designation	November 2002 — one of India's 98 Ramsar sites (early 2026)
Wildlife Sanctuary	Notified under Wildlife Protection Act 1972
River connection	Connected to the Brahmaputra via a channel
Location	SW Guwahati; between NH-37 and the Brahmaputra floodplain

The beel functions as a **natural flood buffer** for Guwahati — absorbing monsoon runoff before it can inundate the city. The 2022 and 2023 Guwahati floods were partly attributed to degradation of wetland buffer capacity.

Ecological Significance

Birds: Deepor Beel is a critical wintering ground for migratory waterfowl on the **Central Asian Flyway**. The **Baer's Pochard** (*Aythya baeri*) — one of the world's most critically endangered ducks — overwinters here. Historical records document 200+ bird species using the beel.

Mammals: The beel's fringing forest provides elephant passage between the Rani and Garbhanga Reserve Forests — an important wildlife corridor in a heavily urbanised landscape.

Fish: Supports traditional artisanal fisheries for local communities, particularly the **Bodo** and other indigenous groups around the beel.

The Governance Failure

The Kalshila-Deepor Beel case illustrates a pattern of **environmental governance breakdown** that UPSC Mains GS-2 and GS-3 directly examine:

Multiple agencies, unclear jurisdiction: Forest Department, Revenue Department, Urban Development Authority, District Administration, Police — each has partial jurisdiction; none has full enforcement authority

Court orders exist but are not enforced: High Court orders are on record; enforcement at field level has not happened

Night operations evade monitoring: Earth cutting at 8 PM exploits inspection gaps

Economic incentives for middlemen: Commercial sale of extracted earth to construction projects is highly profitable; the organised nature suggests a structured racket

This mirrors challenges at other ecologically sensitive urban wetlands — Mumbai’s Aarey, Chennai’s Pallikaranai marsh, Bengaluru’s Bellandur lake.

Wetland Protection Framework in India

Ramsar Convention (1971): The Convention on Wetlands of International Importance was signed at Ramsar, Iran in February 1971 and entered into force in December 1975. India acceded in 1982. The convention requires parties to designate at least one wetland of international importance and ensure its conservation. Ramsar sites must be maintained on the **Montreux Record** if they are under threat.

Wetlands (Conservation and Management) Rules, 2017: These rules under the **Environment Protection Act, 1986** are India’s primary domestic instrument for wetland protection. Key provisions:

- State Wetland Authorities to regulate activities within wetland boundaries
- Prohibition on reclamation, encroachment, and solid waste dumping
- Requirement for wetland health monitoring
- Central Wetland Regulatory Authority at national level

National Plan for Conservation of Aquatic Ecosystems (NPCA): The Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEFCC) funds wetland conservation under NPCA, which merged the National Wetland Conservation Programme (NWCP) and the National Lake Conservation Plan (NLCP).

Threats to Deepor Beel — Systemic

Threat	Status
Urban encroachment (housing, construction)	Ongoing — beel area has shrunk significantly
Railway track through beel	NFR (Northeast Frontier Railway) track bisects the beel — blocks bird and fish movement
Solid waste dumping	Guwahati Municipal Corporation waste site near beel boundary
Illegal earth cutting (Kalshila)	Active since 2021
Agricultural drainage	Pesticide and nutrient runoff from adjacent farms

UPSC Angle — Prelims & GS-3: Ramsar Convention: signed 1971 (Ramsar, Iran); entered force 1975; India 1982; India has 98 Ramsar sites; largest: Sundarbans (WB). Montreux Record: list of Ramsar sites under ecological threat — two Indian sites are on it: Keoladeo NP (Bharatpur, Rajasthan) and Loktak Lake

(Manipur). Wetlands Rules 2017 under EPA 1986. Baer's Pochard: Critically Endangered IUCN; overwinters in Deepor Beel. Central Asian Flyway: migration route from Arctic/Central Asia to South Asia/Africa.

UPSC RELEVANCE

Deepor Beel (Ramsar 2002, Assam, Kamrup Metro, only Ramsar site in Assam); Kalshila wetland; Baer's Pochard (Critically Endangered); Ramsar Convention (1971, Iran, India 1982); Montreux Record; Wetlands Rules 2017 (under EPA 1986); Central Asian Flyway; 98 Ramsar sites in India.

MAINS GS-3:

Wetland conservation governance — why do court orders fail at field level? Urban wetland loss and flood risk. Multi-agency coordination failure in environmental enforcement.

MAINS GS-2:

Judicial orders and executive enforcement gap — accountability deficit.

★ FACTS CORNER — KNOWLEDGEPEDIA

DEEPOP BEEL:

Location: SW Guwahati, **Kamrup (Metro) district, Assam**

Ramsar site since 2002 — India's only Ramsar site in Assam; one of 98 in India (early 2026)

Also: **Wildlife Sanctuary** under WPA 1972

Connected to: **Brahmaputra river system** (serves as flood buffer for Guwahati)

Key threatened species: **Baer's Pochard** (*Aythya baeri*) — IUCN Critically Endangered; migratory duck

Bird count: 200+ species; part of **Central Asian Flyway**

Elephant corridor: Links Rani and Garbhanga Reserve Forests

KALSHILA WETLAND CRISIS:

Location: Satmile, Jalukbari, Guwahati — hydrologically connected to Deepor Beel

Threat: Night-time JCB earth extraction + commercial soil sale by organized groups

Duration: Active since 2021 (dry season recurring)

Violations: Gauhati HC order, district prohibitory orders, Assam Forest Dept regulations

RAMSAR CONVENTION:

Signed: **February 2, 1971** (World Wetlands Day = Feb 2 annually)

Location of signing: **Ramsar, Iran**

Entered into force: **December 21, 1975**

India's accession: **1982**

India's Ramsar sites: **98** (early 2026) — most in South Asia; 3rd globally after UK and Mexico

Largest Ramsar site in India: **Sundarbans** (West Bengal)

Montreux Record: Ramsar sites under ecological threat; Indian sites on record: **Keoladeo NP (Rajasthan)** and **Loktak Lake (Manipur)**

WETLAND PROTECTION FRAMEWORK:

Wetlands (Conservation and Management) Rules, 2017 — under EPA 1986; primary domestic instrument

Central Wetland Regulatory Authority — national-level body

State Wetland Authorities — regulate activity within wetland boundaries

NPCA (National Plan for Conservation of Aquatic Ecosystems) — MoEFCC; merged NWCP + NLCP

OTHER RELEVANT FACTS:

World Wetlands Day: **February 2** (anniversary of Ramsar Convention signing)

Central Asian Flyway: Migration route from Arctic/Central Asia through South Asia to Africa; India is a major wintering ground

Baer's Pochard: Once common across East/Southeast Asia; now <1,000 individuals remain globally

NFR (Northeast Frontier Railway): Its track through Deepor Beel is a chronic barrier to wildlife movement; longstanding conservation concern

Pallikaranai (Chennai), Aarey (Mumbai), Bellandur (Bengaluru): Urban wetlands facing similar encroachment threats

Sources: [GKToday](#), [MoEFCC](#), [Ramsar](#)

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