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India's first water body census

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Why in News: The Ministry of Jal Shakti released a report of the first-ever water body census recently. It provides detailed information on water bodies in the country.

About Waterbody census

It is a database of water bodies, which provides information about ponds, tanks, lakes and reservoirs in India. Conducted in 2018-19, the census is also the first time that such an exercise has been conducted in the country.

According to the water body census report, traditional methodology i.e. paper based schedules were canvassed both for rural and urban areas for the census of water bodies.

Three schedules — 'village schedule', 'urban schedule' and 'water body schedule' were prepared to collect information on water bodies. Besides, a smart phone was used to capture latitude, longitude and photographs of water bodies.

Need for a water bodies census

Earlier, the Centre used to maintain a database of only those water bodies which were being provided Central assistance under the Scheme of Repair, Renovation and Restoration (RRR) of water bodies.

However, in 2016, a Parliamentary Standing Committee pointed out the need of conducting a separate census of water bodies.

It was after the committee's recommendation that the government launched the first census of water bodies in 2018-19 in convergence with the sixth minor irrigation census.

Definition of a water body

As per the water body census, "All natural or man-made units bounded on all sides with some or no masonry work used for storing water for irrigation or other purposes (e.g. industrial, pisciculture, domestic/drinking, recreation, religious, ground water recharge etc.) will be treated as water bodies in this Census.

These are usually of various types known by different names like tank, reservoirs, ponds etc."

"A structure where water from ice-melt, streams, springs, rain or drainage of water from residential or other areas is accumulated or water is stored by diversion from a stream, nala or river will also be treated as water body," states the water body census report.

Water bodies covered under the census

The first water body census doesn't cover all the water bodies

Excluded from the coverage of the census are oceans, lagoons, river, stream, spring, waterfalls, canals, which are free flowing without any bounded storage of water; swimming pools; covered water tank created for specific

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purpose by any individual family or household for their sole consumption; water tank constructed by any factory owner for consumption of water as raw material or consumable; temporary water bodies created by digging for mining, brick kilns, and construction activities, which may get filled up during rainy season; and pucca open water tank created only for drinking for cattle.

Main findings of the Water Bodies Census

The water body census report states that India has 24.24 lakh water bodies like ponds, tanks, and lakes, with West Bengal accounting the most (7.47 lakh) and Sikkim the least (134).

The report says, “24,24,540 water bodies have been enumerated in the country, out of which 97.1% (23,55,055) are in rural areas and only 2.9% (69,485) are in urban areas.”

“59.5% (14,42,993) of water bodies are ponds, followed by tanks (15.7%, i.e 3,81,805), reservoirs (12.1%, i.e 2,92,280), Water conservation schemes/percolation tanks/check dams (9.3%, i.e 2,26,217), lakes (0.9%, i.e 22,361) and others (2.5%, i.e 58,884).” it adds.

According to the report, “West Bengal has highest number of ponds & reservoirs, whereas Andhra Pradesh has highest number of tanks, Tamil Nadu has highest number of lakes and Maharashtra is the leading state for water conservation scheme.”

In addition to West Bengal, six other states — Uttar Pradesh (2.45 lakh), Andhra Pradesh (1.90 lakh), Odisha (1.81 lakh), Assam (1.72 lakh), Jharkhand (1.07 lakh) and Tamil Nadu (1.06 lakh) — each have over one lakh water bodies. There are four states and UTs — Arunachal Pradesh (993), Delhi (893), Chandigarh (188) and Sikkim (134) — each of which account for below 1,000 water bodies.

The census had also collected data on encroachment of water bodies, for the first time. “1.6% water bodies out of all the enumerated water bodies are reported to be encroached out of which 95.4% are in rural areas and remaining 4.6% in urban areas.

Out of all encroached water bodies, 62.8% water bodies have less than 25% area under encroachment, whereas 11.8% water bodies have more than 75% area under encroachment,” states the report.

It further says out of the total 24.24 lakh water bodies, 38,496 water bodies were encroached, of which Uttar Pradesh accounted the most— 15,301.

The state was followed by Tamil Nadu (8,366) and Andhra Pradesh (3,920). No encroachment on water bodies was reported from four states — West Bengal, Sikkim, Arunachal Pradesh and Chandigarh.

As per the report, West Bengal’s South 24 Pargana has been ranked as the top district having the highest (3.55 lakh) number of water bodies across the country. The district is followed by Andhra Pradesh’s Ananthapur (50,537) and West Bengal’s Howrah (37,301).