



World Water Day: thirsty cities

Title

Coping with the growing water needs of cities is one of the most pressing challenges of this century. Half of the world's population now lives in cities and it's estimated that within two decades this will increase to nearly 60% of the population, or five billion people. Ensuring reliable access to safe water supplies is essential to make the cities of the future truly sustainable. This means protecting and conserving intact watersheds. For example, Shivapuri-Nagarjun National Park provides Kathmandu, the capital of Nepal, and its 3.2 million inhabitants with nearly 60% of its annual freshwater requirements. Unfortunately, ecosystem services, the benefits that people derive from nature, such as water, are often unrecognised and undervalued. This is why BirdLife International is working with its national Partner, Bird Conservation Nepal, to develop a new toolkit to assess ecosystem services at the site-scale. The approach incorporates accessible, state-of-the-art methods with participatory, inexpensive ones that result in acceptably robust values. At Shivapuri-Nagarjun National Park, water has been identified as just one of the important ecosystem services provided by the park-carbon storage and sequestration of the oak-dominated forests make a significant contribution to Nepal's climate mitigation strategy, while local recreation and nature-based international tourism are important sources of income. The park has been long recognised as important for biodiversity, having been identified as is one of 27 Important Bird Areas in Nepal, sites of international importance for bird conservation. Now we can appreciate the value of Shivapuri-Nagarjun National Park for both biodiversity and human well-being, and therefore the importance of investment and management of this protected area, says Dr Hum Gurung, CEO of Bird Conservation Nepal. Many of the world's big cities have understood that protecting natural ecosystems to secure their water supplies makes economic sense. Rather than chopping down forests, keeping water catchments healthy saves billions of dollars by not having to pay for costly urban infrastructure to store water, clean it or bring it from elsewhere, he added. Protection of this watershed is vital to continue to provide the water required by a growing population in the Kathmandu Valley. Good management will benefit local people and the wider global community in maintaining the delivery of a suite of ecosystem services, as well as the conservation of biodiversity. For more information on BirdLife's work on ecosystem services, which is supported by the Darwin Initiative, see <http://darwin.defra.gov.uk/project/18005/>. The objective of World Water Day 2011 is to focus international attention on the impact of rapid urban population growth, industrialization and uncertainties caused by climate change, conflicts and natural disasters on urban water systems. This year's theme, Water for cities: responding to the urban challenge, aims to spotlight and encourage governments, organisations, communities, and individuals to actively engage in addressing the challenges of urban water management.