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Governing the Urban Wetlands: A Comparative Case Study of Ecology, Ecosystem Services and Government Policy

Urban wetland governance is a policy area with global causes and consequences, that hasn't gained the deserved attention in environmental research. Rapid global urbanization of coastal areas has endangered many important wetland systems. These wetlands provide essential ecosystem services and their degradation put large urban communities at significant risk. This paper investigates the characteristics of urban wetland governance systems and related policy development across four globally spread cases: New York, Tokyo, Kolkata and Colombo. The cases were analyzed using selected policy analysis criteria and discussed within the context of global policy trends, urbanization patterns and environmental change. Despite the apparent diversity of the cases we observed many similar characteristics among the existing institutional arrangements and common policy drivers. However the local factors such as property markets, national or state level urban development policies and community wetland use had the decisive sway over policy and institutional development. We conclude that trying to set globally-applicable normative policy directives or universal ecological reference points are bound to fail in urban wetland governance. The strengths and weaknesses of some important institutional features in the four cases are compared in the analysis and the possible ecological consequences are discussed. The analysis also derives some common lessons for urban wetland governance in major urban areas.