



## THE REVIEW

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### EARTHLY MATTERS: The poison in our water



“We want a safe, clean lake. It’s not just us, but the whole of Karachi that uses water from this lake,” complained a local fisherman on the banks of Keenjhar Lake. Located around two hours drive from Karachi, Keenjhar Lake is supposed to be a freshwater lake that was created from two natural lakes in the ’70s as part of the Kotri Barrage Canal Irrigation Project. Today the lake is heavily polluted — at one of the two main entry points to the lake, trucks, tractors and construction vehicles are parked practically inside the lake, spewing diesel and exhaust into the water. The drivers are not only washing their vehicles, but cooling themselves off in the lake in the sweltering summer heat.

Around them, there are literally thousands of visitors splashing in the water or swimming in the shallow shore. The lake is huge — you can barely see the distant shoreline. They say it is 32 km long and spread over 130 square km. But I am totally shocked by the pollution near the shore — the water is a cloudy grey colour and you can actually smell the diesel, yet the frolicking families seem to be oblivious to the contamination.

“The lake gets around 10,000 to 15,000 visitors every weekend. As for the trucks, well, there is no one to stop them so the drivers just come all the way into the water,” explains Raheela Memon who is working with the Indus for All programme which is now trying to conserve the lake by mobilising the local community. The Indus programme focuses on livelihood support and conservation of natural resources and is in the first phase of a 50-year long vision for the Indus eco-region.

The local fishermen (around 50,000 of them live around the lake, on its shores in clusters of villages) are suffering from drinking the polluted water. In each community, around 70 to 80 per cent of the population has some sort of waterborne disease. I ask the head of the village near the entrance why his people don’t boil the water — “it’s too much of an effort” is the reply.

“Besides, boiling the water does not get rid of the diesel in it!” The fishermen here are more



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worried about their fish catch than the dirty water they are drinking on a daily basis. Over the years, the fish population in the lake has decreased (probably due to all the pollution) so they are having a tough time in making ends meet. The tourists pay for the boat rides, of course, but with rising petrol prices it is becoming even more difficult for them to maintain their motorboats.

How difficult can it be to clean up this lake, I wonder later as we take a boat ride to the middle of the lake to visit the shrine of Noori — legend has it that Noori was a local fisherwoman who fell in love with a Sindhi king, Jam Tamachi of the Sammah dynasty. This was no unrequited love — the king married her and became a fisherman! A miracle indeed, but one that has left its physical presence on the lake in the form of an island shrine located where the water is at its deepest — almost 30 feet. On top of the shrine lie two graves — one of Noori and the other not of the king (he is buried in the Makli hills near Thatta) but of some Syed saint. Here, around the shrine, the water is a clear green colour and you can actually see the little fish swimming just below the surface. It is not just the diesel that is polluting the lake of course — the lake is fed by the Kalri Baghar feeder which takes off from the Kotri Barrage near Jamshoro. Upstream from Jamshoro, a number of industries on the banks of the river dump their effluents into the Indus. There is no one to stop them from doing this, despite the passing of the Pakistan Environmental Protection Act of 1997 which is hardly ever enforced. It is estimated that only around one per cent of industrial wastewater in Pakistan is treated before being dumped into nearby canals and rivers. This is toxic water, full of chemicals and Persistent Organic Pollutants which are carcinogenic! Presently, 47 per cent of the country's population is living without safe drinking water. Hospital records show that about 80 per cent of the diseases are either waterborne or airborne. The nation's health bill has increased quite significantly — and all because the local and provincial governments can't be bothered to clean up their local water supply!

At Keenjhar Lake, however, it's not all doom and gloom. The local fishermen are organising themselves into community-based organisations and they intend to take ownership of this neglected lake. After all, they have no other source of income and are completely dependant on the lake for their survival. "If the government helps us, we can kick out the truck drivers and clean up this lake," they tell me. It's a beginning at least — a clean lake will not only be beneficial for them, but for the entire

population of Karachi, too.

— *Rina Saeed Khan*



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