



## **Balancing Ecosystem Conservation and Property Rights in the Kelani River Basin: Legal and Governance Challenges for Urban Wetland Protection at the Local Government Level**

**S.T. Perera<sup>1\*</sup>, R.R. Perera<sup>2</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>*Department of Business Law, Faculty of Law, General Sir John Kotelawala Defence University, Sri Lanka.*

<sup>2</sup>*Department of Public and International Law, Faculty of Law, University of Colombo, Colombo 03, Sri Lanka.*

*\*[sandali.perera@kdu.ac.lk](mailto:sandali.perera@kdu.ac.lk)*

The urban wetlands of the Kelani River Basin constitute one of Sri Lanka's most ecologically significant urban ecosystems, providing essential ecosystem services, including flood mitigation, biodiversity conservation, climate regulation, water purification, and enhanced urban resilience. However, rapid urbanization, wetland reclamation, mangrove clearance, and unplanned land-use change have significantly degraded these ecosystems, increasing the vulnerability of surrounding communities to recurrent flooding. Although existing studies have examined these challenges from geographical, ecological, and urban planning perspectives, limited attention has been given to the role of environmental law and local government in balancing ecosystem conservation with private property rights and urban development. This study examines the legal and governance challenges associated with urban wetland protection at the local government level within the Kelani River Basin. It focuses on the Kotikawatta – Mulleriyawa Pradeshiya Sabha and the Kolonnawa Urban Council, as these local authority areas are among the most frequently affected by flooding caused by the Kelani River. The destruction and reclamation of urban wetlands for residential and commercial development have substantially reduced the natural flood retention capacity of these areas, contributing to the increasing severity of flood events. The study adopts a mixed-methods approach, combining doctrinal legal analysis with empirical research. The legal analysis examines the Constitution of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka (1978), the Pradeshiya Sabhas Act No. 15 of 1987, the Urban Councils Ordinance No. 61 of 1939, relevant environmental legislation, national policies, and institutional mandates governing wetland management. The empirical component consists of questionnaire surveys conducted among residents and semi-structured interviews with officials of the Kotikawatta – Mulleriyawa Pradeshiya Sabha, the Kolonnawa Urban Council, and other relevant public institutions. The study seeks to identify legal and institutional lacunae that limit the capacity of local governments to protect urban wetlands while balancing environmental conservation with urban development. It is expected to reveal challenges arising from fragmented institutional responsibilities, inconsistent enforcement, competing land-use priorities, and limited public awareness. Based on these findings, the study proposes recommendations for legislative and institutional reform to strengthen local governance, improve inter-agency coordination, promote community participation, and establish an integrated ecosystem-based legal framework that supports sustainable urban wetland conservation and sustainable development in Sri Lanka.

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