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Vembanad Lake and the Kerala Backwaters

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Vembanad Lake and the Kerala Backwaters

Vembanad is the lake most people picture when they think of Kerala. Houseboats float on it, rice grows below its level, and snake boats race across it. It is also a protected wetland and a worry for planners.

1 Why is Vembanad India's longest lake?

Vembanad is the longest lake in India. It stretches along the Kerala coast. It is a backwater lake, so it lies just behind the sea and is fed by rivers.



Houseboats on Vembanad Lake, part of the Kerala backwaters. Photo: Vyacheslav Argenberg, via Wikimedia Commons, CC BY 4.0.

Where does it lie?

The lake spreads across four districts of Kerala. These are Ernakulam, Alappuzha, Kottayam and Thrissur. The wider wetland around it is called the Vembanad-Kol Wetland.

What kind of lake is it?

It is a lagoon and floodplain complex. A lagoon is a shallow water body separated from the sea by a strip of land. Rivers pour fresh water in, and the sea sends salt water back in.

> **Quick check 1.** Vembanad is the longest lake in India. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Sources: outlooktraveller.com; indianwetlands.in

2 What makes Vembanad a Ramsar site?

A Ramsar site is a wetland of international importance. Vembanad-Kol was designated on 19 August 2002. It covers 1,51,250 hectares.

What does the wetland hold?

The factsheet counts 225 bird species, 102 fish species and over 200 plant species. The Pearl Spot is listed among the notable fish. So is the Malabar mystus.

Why does it matter to people?

The wetland supports the livelihoods of over 0.2 million households. It is also a flood buffer for the cities of Kochi and Ernakulam. Kuttanad, the rice bowl of Kerala, lies within it.

What threatens it?

The factsheet names pollution, encroachment, invasive species, tourism pressure and fragmented management. The 2026 houseboat order, covered below, answers one of these threats.

Who manages it?

The State Wetland Authority of Kerala manages it.

> **Quick check 2.** The Thanneermukkom Bund splits Vembanad into a salt-water part and a fresh-water part. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Sources: indianwetlands.in; fao.org

3 What does the Thanneermukkom Bund do?

The Thanneermukkom Bund is a barrier built across the lake. It splits the lake into a salt-water part and a fresh-water part. It was built across the lake in 1975.

Why was it built?

Tides from the Arabian Sea used to push salt water into the low lands of Kuttanad. Paddy needs fresh water. The bund stops that salt water on the farm side.

What is the catch?

The lake is now split in two. One part is brackish and the other is fresh. The Ramsar factsheet lists regulation by the Thanneermukkom barrier as a key value of the wetland.

Quick check 3. Kuttanad is the only farming system in India that grows rice below sea level. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Sources: indianwetlands.in; outlooktraveller.com

4 How does rice grow below sea level in Kuttanad?

Farmers build walls around fields and drain the water out. This creates dry land in the middle of a lake. Such a diked field is called a polder.

What is special about Kuttanad?

The FAO recognises the Kuttanad Below Sea Level Farming System as a Globally Important Agricultural Heritage System. It got this status in 2013. It is the only system in India that grows rice below sea level on land made by draining delta swamps in brackish waters.

What are the walls made of?

The bunds around the polders use coconut co-products, sand, twigs and high-quality clay. Once the field is walled in, the water is pumped out by oil engines or electric motors. Then rice is sown.

Quick check 4. Pathiramanal island can be reached by road. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Sources: fao.org; indianwetlands.in

5 What lives on the lake and its islands?

Fish, birds and plants share the lake. The Ramsar factsheet lists the Pearl Spot and the Malabar mystus among its notable fish.

What is Pathiramanal?

Pathiramanal is a small island in the lake. It lies between the backwaters of Thanneermukkom and Kumarakom. It spreads over about ten acres.

Can you reach it by road?

No. It can be reached only by boat.

What lives there?

Kerala Tourism lists about 90 bird species and 30 butterfly species. It also lists about 160 plant species, 55 fish species and 20 spider species. For a tiny island, that is a rich count.

> **Quick check 5.** The first official Nehru Trophy Boat Race was held in 1952. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Sources: keralatourism.org; indianwetlands.in

6 Where does the Nehru Trophy Boat Race come from?

The race began as a show for a guest. On 22 December 1952, an exhibition boat race was held during Jawaharlal Nehru's visit to Alappuzha. The Nadubhagam Chundan won it, and Nehru rode that boat to the city.

When was the first official race?

The first official Nehru Trophy race was held in 1954. It took place in the Kainakari Meenappilli backwaters. The Kavalam Chundan won it.

Where is it held now?

It now runs on a permanent 1,380 m track on the Punnamada lake. The trophy has been renamed the Prime Minister's Trophy.

How did it become a yearly event?

Back in Delhi, Nehru sent a silver trophy. It was then decided to hold the race every year.

Sources: keralatourism.org; alappuzha.nic.in

7 Why did the High Court act on houseboat waste?

Tourism is now the lake's biggest pressure. In April 2026 the High Court ordered that houseboats which do not treat their waste must not run on Vembanad. The order took effect after 19 April.

What did the Ports Department do?

It began inspections of houseboats on Monday, 20 April 2026. It checked for valid pollution control systems and certificates. The first inspection found one houseboat without valid documents.

Is the lake too crowded?

An expert quoted in the press said the number of houseboats exceeds the lake's carrying capacity. Carrying capacity is the number the lake can bear without harm. Untreated waste has even changed the colour of the water.

What is the industry doing?

Owners' groups have started a trial of a bio-digestive treatment system. It was developed with the NIST (National Institute of Standards and Technology).

Sources: onmanorama.com; indianwetlands.in

8 Which exam traps should you avoid?

- The longest lake in India is Vembanad.
- The Thanneermukkom Bund splits salt water from fresh water. It does not make the lake fresh everywhere.
- Kuttanad is the only Indian system that grows rice below sea level.
- Pathiramanal is an island reached only by boat.
- The first official Nehru Trophy race was in 1954. The exhibition race was in 1952.
- Cichlids are tied to the Kerala backwaters, not the Sundarbans, Narmada or Godavari.

What was asked in CDS-II 2019?

Question 71 asked where the largest quantity of cichlids is found in India. The answer was the backwaters of Kerala. The wrong options were plausible places, so tie each species to one water body. View CDS-II 2019 GK Paper, Q71 →

What is the memory hook?

Longest lake, locked by a bund, farmed below the sea, raced on in boats.

Sources: fao.org; keralatourism.org

Practice MCQs

1. Vembanad Lake, in Kerala, holds which distinction among India's lakes?

A. It is India's longest lake, running about 96 kilometres

B. It is India's only tidal lake

C. It is India's highest-altitude lake

D. It is India's largest freshwater lake by volume

See answer ↓

2. In which year was the Vembanad-Kol Wetland designated a Ramsar site?

A. 1952

B. 2013

C. 1975

D. 2002

See answer ↓

3. What is the main purpose of the Thanneermukkom Bund built across Vembanad Lake?

A. To generate hydroelectric power

B. To stop tidal salt water from entering Kuttanad

C. To supply drinking water to Kochi

D. To divert flood water to the sea

See answer ↓

4. The Kuttanad farming system, recognised by the FAO as a Globally Important Agricultural Heritage System, is unique in India for which reason?

A. It uses terraces cut into mountains

B. It grows rice below sea level

C. It farms crops in a cold desert

D. It grows tea on high hill slopes

See answer ↓

5. When was the first official Nehru Trophy Boat Race held?

A. 1954

B. 1952

C. 1975

D. 2002

See answer ↓

Answer Key

1. **A.** Vembanad is the longest lake in India. It stretches along the Kerala coast across four districts. These are Ernakulam, Alappuzha, Kottayam and Thrissur. It is a lagoon and floodplain complex and a Ramsar site since 2002. Memory hook: longest lake, locked by a bund, farmed below the sea. ↑ Q1
2. **D.** The wetland was designated on 19 August 2002. It covers 1,51,250 hectares across four districts. The Ramsar factsheet lists it as a lagoon and floodplain complex. The other years are real dates in the Vembanad story, which makes them tempting. Memory hook: Ramsar in 2002. ↑ Q2
3. **B.** The bund keeps tidal salt water from the Arabian Sea out of the low lands of Kuttanad. Paddy needs fresh water. It was built across the lake in 1975. The lake is now split into brackish and fresh parts. Memory hook: the bund locks out the salt. ↑ Q3
4. **B.** Kuttanad is the only system in India that favours rice cultivation below sea level. Farmers wall in fields called polders. The water is then pumped out by oil engines or electric motors. It got the FAO status in 2013. Memory hook: rice below the sea. ↑ Q4
5. **A.** The first official race was held in 1954 at Kainakari Meenappilli. The Kavalam Chundan won it. The 1952 race was only an exhibition race for Nehru's visit. Nehru then sent a silver trophy, and the race became yearly. Memory hook: show in 1952, official in 1954. ↑ Q5

Quick-check answers

1. **True.** It stretches along the Kerala coast and is the longest lake in the country. ↑ 1
2. **True.** It keeps tidal salt water from the Arabian Sea out of Kuttanad. ↑ 2
3. **True.** The FAO recognises it as a Globally Important Agricultural Heritage System. ↑ 3
4. **False.** It can be reached only by boat. ↑ 4
5. **False.** The 1952 race was an exhibition race. The first official race was in 1954. ↑ 5

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