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Staff Reporter

*Call to shun projects that need conversion of wetlands*

Benoy Viswom says there is no precedence of land being given back on expiry of lease term.

There has been no precedence of private parties ever returning land given on lease to them after expiry of the rent period, former Forest Minister Benoy Viswom has said.

Addressing a seminar on 'green politics and forest conservation' organised by the ecological department of the Church of South India (CSI) at Othara on Sunday, he said foreigners visiting the State in the name of development projects were eyeing the picturesque landscape of Kerala.

Probably commenting on the greenfield airport project at Aranmula, Mr. Viswom said a bold and courageous 'no' should be the answer to those development projects that required conversion of paddy fields and wetlands.

Water constituted the basic requirement of any development activity. Conversion of the biodiversity-rich wetlands and water-rich paddy fields (puncha) would lead to depletion of ground water table and drying up of wells and other water sources, he added.

Mr. Viswom also stressed the grave need for implementing various recommendations in the Gadgil Committee Report to protect the Western Ghats, from where many river systems originated.

Bishop Thomas K. Oommen of the CSI, who inaugurated the seminar, said the CSI had taken a strong resolve to strictly adhere to environment-friendly development works.

Marxism, Gandhism, and theology should be brought together to protect nature and environment, he said.

V.D. Satheesan, MLA, said a hollow development agenda was the biggest problem the State faced.

Mr. Satheesan said the proposed private airport at Aranmula which required large-scale conversion of paddy land and wetland was testimony to man's neglect of the environment and his callous approach to water conservation. No development would be possible without conserving the environment, he said.

Mr. Satheesan said environment conservation should be given top priority in our development initiatives. Mathew Koshy Punnackadu, environment department director of the Church of South India, presided. Fr. Joby Varghese, Sucie Abraham, M.M. Abraham, Fr. Lalgy M. Philip, also spoke.

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