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High tech buoy: Puducherry visitors can now get beach water quality with a click on their smartphones

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CHENNAI: Chennai residents off to Puducherry on weekends can soon, at the click of a button, check if the coastal waters are clean enough before soaking their feet or going scuba diving.

City-based National Centre for Coastal Research (NCCR) on Tuesday deployed a buoy fitted with sensors to automatically measure and transmit various parameters that will be used to generate a five-day forecast on water quality through a computer model. It will be available for the public through a smartphone app. The buoy, anchored 1.5km from the coast, will be dedicated to the nation on Wednesday.

A similar buoy deployed earlier this year off Chennai's Marina beach has been periodically transmitting data to NCCR servers. The solar-powered buoy measures dissolved oxygen, water temperature, conductivity (salinity), depth, blue-green algae, turbidity, pH and chlorophyll. It will also study atmospheric temperature, humidity, wind speed and direction, besides wave speed and direction of currents. The buoy in Puducherry will measure the same parameters. Both buoys can withstand rough weather including six-metre high waves.

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NCCR scientist Pravakar Mishra said data measured by the buoy is valid up to a 10km radius on a day when the anthropogenic load is less from coast, as the data is influenced by load like sewage discharge. Based on the data, the NCCR team will also calculate the water quality index with which remedial measures to improve it, if needed, will be recommended to the local authorities.

“The buoy in Puducherry has already started sending data,” Mishra said. “Compared to Chennai, the water quality in Puducherry is good. In Chennai, two rivers flowing into the sea carry a lot of anthropogenic load which influences the coastal water quality. However, last year, a mass fish kill was reported in Puducherry. So, coastal water quality is a land driven thing.”

After the southwest monsoon ends in September, NCCR plans to deploy similar buoys off Visakhapatnam and Lakshadweep. At present, it collects water samples manually in more than 22 locations along the 7,500km Indian coast every month to measure quality. At Puducherry too, will collect samples manually to calibrate the buoy every other month.