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Citizens' science could come to forest dept aid

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India's State Pollution Control Boards (SPCBs) and Forest Departments struggle to enforce the law, monitor pollution and biodiversity and implement plans. One reason is lack of staff and capacity and lack of appropriate equipment and infrastructure. Citizens' science can partly help.

All over the world, people with an interest in clean water and air, and wildlife, watch their neighbourhoods, monitor changes and sometimes, report their observations. Many of these are on social media, but exceptions exist. The Cornell Ornithology Lab based 'E-bird' site allows birdwatchers to post their sightings almost anywhere in the world, with moderators for data oversight. India makes a rich contribution.

In some cases, monitoring and gathering data lead to court cases or protests. How productive it would be if citizens' science is seen as supplementing state efforts. It would be a force multiplier if citizens' data, cross-checked or otherwise, was used to prevent further pollution. Key shifts are important to successfully tap into this valuable human resource.

First, our education system should include more learnings about critical enquiry and foundations of research for engraining the basics. Second, instead of thinking of citizens as irritants, agencies should train them to collect better data and on the laws. Third, they should be given authority to passively monitor -- creating a formal channel of exchange. Delhi government's Wetlands Mitra is one such new scheme with potential.

The world, and India, is in the midst of a huge environmental crisis. Citizens' science won't remedy that, but it can prevent some of the tragedies this is unleashing.

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