

Topic: Greening India: What Will It Take to Make the Country More Environmentally Conscious?

John Muir, an American environmentalist of great renown, once claimed, "And into the forest I go to lose my mind and find my soul." Nature is mankind's primordial boon, a boon we have somehow spoiled in mere centuries. It is for this reason that, since as far back as the 1980s, students have been exposed to talk after talk about environmental preservation. Unfortunately, it is a classic case of people being "all hat and no cattle," to put it informally. We speak of great measures we should implement, but in actuality, carry out none of them. Perhaps it's time for a different approach. After all, that may be just what it takes to make the country more conscious of what they've been blessed with.

The quickest way to reach the most people has to be through media. The big screen, the small screen, and the silver screen—each has had its own profound influence on Indian culture. Take, for example, Indian fashion; Bollywood-inspired clothing is reproduced in heaps and loads at every wedding and party. The classic Anarkali suit is actually derived from the 1953 film 'Anarkali'. Clearly, the public loves to emulate what they see their idols doing. These presents itself as a solution to the problem at hand—Why not use the medium of cinema to influence people to care for the environment? Not only would it make information more accessible, but it would also create a sense of heroism and achievement within the people. It would show them that they really are a vital component of protecting our surroundings.

In terms of media, there is another powerful tool worth mentioning—the smallest screen, the one we keep on our person at all times. Of course, social media is a great way to spread awareness as well. Brands like Nike, Spotify, and GoPro have been able to expand their clientele simply by staying in the mix on social media platforms and maintaining a relatable and modern image on these pages. This could prove an efficient way to boost environmental consciousness as well—perhaps creating a trend out of "nature influencers," the perpetually smiling and descriptive folks who make videos about hiking and trekking. Not only would it invoke a sense of involvement-based thrill in the average consumer, but it would also act as a perfect proponent of the value of nature's evergreen beauty. These people may be a drop in an ocean of trends, but they are perfect agents of increasing community engagement.

Speaking of community engagement, public interaction is a vastly efficient manner of increasing environmental awareness. Take, for example, the bike-renting system in Singapore. There are stands where one can borrow a bicycle to explore the city and return it when done. These were introduced in order to bring down vehicular carbon emissions.

Since their establishment, the nation has seen a significant level of improvement in their AQI level - the Air Quality Index rating received by each country, measuring pollutant concentration. India, too, could benefit from such a system. With the number of cultural landmarks and heritage sites in our country, bicycle touring would be remarkably enjoyable. Being able to rent a bicycle and explore such beautiful cities as Jodhpur and Agra would be a memorable experience, and the boost our AQI would receive from it is an amazing bonus.

Involving the public more would help them learn through personal experience that it is both fun and advantageous to protect our surroundings, and what better teacher is there than experience.

However, the simplest way to safeguard nature is simply to give people a reason to do so. Incentivization is a perfectly suited solution to this issue. Perhaps, in an ideal situation, preserving our culture for future generations would be motivation enough for people to take care of our environment, but unfortunately, the real world is run by its true green master: Money.

A city or a state could be rewarded with infrastructure grants, education grants, or medicine grants if it manages to achieve, say, a certain AQI level or pollutant dispersion level in a given period of time, with rewards improving along with public participation in the scheme. The good old carrot-on-a-stick approach is seldom known to fail and is more likely to succeed when the 'stick' in question is the disruption of the natural ecosystem and its precarious balance.

It is also a far sight superior to the doomsday fear-mongering currently being taught to students. While it is accurate, people are rarely motivated to work with a guillotine over their heads until it is about to fall, and by that point, all they can do is render it too little, too late.

Having spoken of all these measures to increase public consciousness, it may be worth paying mind to why this is so important for a moment. India has 99 conservation reserves and 72 million hectares of forested land, home to 500 species of mammals, over 2000 species of birds, and a total of over a whopping 90,000 animal species. The country is responsible for taking care of its own, and this doesn't extend only to its citizens—each one of us is charged with the critical duty to do all we can to protect the gift of nature.

If we wait around for a hero to save us, the sun will eventually set on the era of man, and we will be forever engulfed in the dark, regretting what we didn't do when we could. The ever-prominent threat to our environment isn't news to the people anymore; rather, it is just an accepted fact, a future we have resigned ourselves to. If ever we wish to see real change, then this attitude needs to be totally reversed, or else we truly are doomed to a barren future.

It is crystal clear that if we do not change our approach soon, there will be no environment left to preserve. No soil left to plant trees in, and no taps left to turn off. Thus, it is plain and simple that new life and new energy must be breathed into our attempts to reverse the actions of our brash and thoughtless predecessors. Standing together as one nation and employing modern means to resolve this age old issue, I am positive, we can maintain nature's beauty as Theodore Roosevelt, the first environmentalist, US president and the man responsible for establishing the Muir Woods once expressed, "A group of giant redwood or sequoia should be kept just as we keep a great and beautiful cathedral." Hence, he expressed the importance of preserving the sanctity of nature as diligently we do the sanctity of prayer and so doing, hopefully, sustaining its longevity. We must make hay while the sun shines, for long doesn't remain before it won't.