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Smart ways to green cities: Kolkata shows the way

IANS | Kolkata April 21, 2014 Last Updated at 15:12 IST

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From reclaiming parks and open spaces to promoting carpools and empowering rag-pickers to manage waste -- denizens of this eastern metropolis are pitching in to make the city green.

As the uninviting reality of climate change becomes clear coupled with growing urbanization, smart solutions aimed towards boosting sustainable communities is the need of the hour.

Take for example the "Ragpickers Turn Entrepreneurs" initiative, one of the 24 case studies compiled in an e-book "Pathways to Green Cities -- Innovative Ideas from Urban India" by the Earth Day Network (EDN), the global organiser of Earth Day April 22 each year.

The book was launched here recently at the Oxford Bookstore.

With 2014 themed on green cities, waste management occupies a crucial place for urban ventures.

How about some figures to get a perspective on the enormity of the problem?

An estimated 5,372 tonnes of solid waste is generated in [Kolkata](#) every day and 7.4 percent of the trash is waste paper.

The organization, South Asian Forum for Environment (SAFE), through its "Resolve: Trash to Cash" venture, empowers poor ragpickers, particularly women, to transform trash into artistic treasures, including papier mache

products, according to Amrita Chatterjee of Research and Communication, SAFE.

Through workshops, slum dwellers were taught the utilization of waste papers, thereby providing them a means of livelihood. This entrepreneurial venture is expected to reduce poverty level by 27 percent and protect the ragpickers from exposure to hazardous waste of dumps.

Meanwhile, the urban youth of the city is busy promoting car sharing among school goers to ease traffic congestion and mitigate air pollution, courtesy the EDN's "Backseat Buddies" campaign.

"In the first phase of Backseat Buddies, the campaign included 70,000 students in 33 schools; 7,000 played an active role in implementing 'Backseat Buddies'," said Abhirup, the ambassador of this project from Frank Anthony Public School, Kolkata.

In Kolkata, around 65 per cent of the arterial roads are choked by bumper-to-bumper traffic, often limiting travel speeds to as low as 20 km/hr.

Data shows 50-75 percent fuel will be saved if three people commute in one car while 1.66 metric tonnes of carbon is emitted each year by vehicles in India.

Carpools not only help conserve fuel, money as well as encourage bonding and friendship among the children as they travel together, said Abhirup.

Another facet of green cities is parks and open spaces that help stabilise the urban biodiversity (flora and fauna) and provide a place for people to mingle, which is fast becoming a luxury nowadays.

Efforts by the Kolkata-based Center for Contemporary Communication (CCC), Kolkata and NGO Nature Mates, have ensured the retrieval of some areas and prevent other parklands from being urbanized.

"Green spaces, like parks etc. provide eco-system services and offer a rich urban bio-diversity to exist. Due to pollution bio-diversity order is affected and more and more concretization spoils the greenery of our city," said Tapati Ghosh, president, CCC.

So far, 514 spaces have been investigated and a Kolkata Park Dictionary was launched in 2011 by the organization and is trying to increase the number of species in green areas through butterfly gardens and other such themes.

However, state director of World Wildlife Fund, Saswati Ghosh cautioned about the proportion of cutting and felling trees in the city which is markedly higher than the parks and open spaces.

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