

How Thousands of Children in Pune Prevented Over 50 Tonnes of Plastic from Reaching the Sea

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Scientists have warned about the dangers of plastic pollution and microplastics in the environment for a while now. However, most people still aren't convinced of the link between carelessly discarding a water bottle and damage in the seas. After all, plastic in the ocean doesn't have the powerful symbolism of nuclear plants or oil spills: most of it is below the waves, often invisible to the naked eye. **A unique Pune-based initiative, Sagar Mitra Abhiyan (Friend of the Ocean), hopes to change this by creating a cultural shift in public perceptions and behaviour concerning plastic pollution.**



Students of the Sagar Mitra Abhiyan It all

started during a riverbank cleanliness drive that had been organised by the NGO The Academic Advisors (TAA) with schoolchildren. The founders of TAA, Vinod Bodhankar, Susan Raj and Lalit Rathi, had accompanied the children on the cleanliness drive. When the trio saw that the mountain of waste along the riverbank contained syringe needles, pieces of glass and other such sharp objects, they realised that they could not ask the children to pick up plastic from sites where they could be exposed to such hazardous materials. Sending the children home, they decided to design a method in which children could safely and effectively contribute to the collection, recycling and disposal of plastic. This resulted in TAA's Sagar-Mitra Abhiyaan initiative which began in 2011 with 150 children from one school. The Abhiyan is supported and guided by other NGOs like the Pune Jalbiradari and the Clean Garbage Management Private Ltd. Under this programme, students from classes 5 to 9 are shown a presentation about pollution caused by plastic, which is then explained in the clearest and simplest terms by TAA members. The slideshow contains images of marine life and birds choked to death on plastic or the heaps of refuse containing tons of plastic that is contaminating rivers, lakes and other water bodies. For most children, it is the first time that such a direct connection has been shown between human practices and the destruction that is caused to millions of blameless creatures. This quickly and effectively communicates the message that preventing plastic waste from reaching water bodies can protect many such creatures from dying or choking through no fault of their own. As a result, the presentation succeeds in bringing the focus on plastic as a major environmental threat.



[Plastic pollution is a major threat to marine organisms.](#) After the presentation, the students are given a plastic bag in which they will collect clean, dry, empty plastic from their homes (with at least one item daily, or 30 items in a month) like packets, bottles, bottle tops, ball pen casings, old combs etc. These are put into a big plastic bag kept specially for the purpose. Every month, on a designated day, the students hand over the bag full of plastic items to teachers and volunteers at school. There is no penalty for students who say they could not find any plastic – they can hand over the the empty Sagar-Mitra plastic bag to deposit at the



school. Students of the Sagar Mitra Abhiyan Each child who collects plastic waste, only from the confines of his or her home, is declared a 'Sagar-Mitra' which translates to 'Friend of the Ocean' in Hindi. In turn, these children also spread awareness among their family members and friends.

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