

## Citizens' collective starts Biodiversity by the Bay campaign in Mumbai

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The group, which includes environmentalists and lawyers, has appealed state environment minister Aaditya Thackery to protect flamingos and their habitats, declare the entire 3,122-acre Aarey Milk Colony as a forest, increase protection for Mumbai's green cover, ensure supportive policy for the livelihood of fishers, and increase open spaces and parks as part of the campaign. (Representational Photo/HT)

Ministry of Mumbai's Magic, a citizens' collective, has announced the launch of Biodiversity by the Bay campaign to highlight the need for sustainable development to enhance protection for the city's environment.

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habitats, declare the entire 3,122-acre Aarey Milk Colony as a forest, increase protection for Mumbai's green cover, ensure supportive policy for the livelihood of fishers, and increase open spaces and parks as part of the campaign.

“A collective effort is needed to amplify diverse voices to safeguard Mumbai's rich ecosystems and unique biodiversity,” said Bhagwan Keshbhat, founder, Waatavaran, one of the groups spearheading the campaign. “Our end goal is to create a youth-led climate movement including fisherfolk, indigenous communities, law and architect students and local communities.”

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A study in July found a 42.5% drop in Mumbai's green cover over 30 years with the ratio of green spaces to total geographical area falling from 46.7% in 1988 to 26.67% in 2018 due to developmental activities. There is less than half a tree per person in Mumbai, according to NGO Praja Foundation's data.

Kanchi Kohli, an environmental governance expert at New Delhi's Centre for Policy Research, said the conservation of green spaces is directly linked with public health including access to clean air and water. “Urban planning at all levels needs to incorporate strategies to save public commons, protect natural areas like wetlands, mangroves, city forests and undertake ecologically informed programmes to enhance environmental quality. All of this will only be enhanced if done with a citizen-state partnership.”

Urban planners said the development regulation dilutions were facilitating builders to create more concretised structures and reduce green cover. “The

city's existing open spaces is a meagre 0.9 square metre per person. It can be increased to 2 square metre per capita if all plots are developed under the development plan 2034," said Pankaj Joshi, executive director, Urban Research Design Institute.

One of the partner organisations, Civis, would collect citizen's inputs on open spaces and parks as part of the campaign. "We will be sharing this with the BMC [Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation] so that they can assure greater accessibility and availability of such open spaces," said Antaraa Vasudev, founder, Civis.

Anushri Shetty, an architecture student, said public parks should not be seen from a purely utilitarian angle but should be a source of pride in the local communities. "Local art must be channelised to create landmark features that will help develop an interactive park culture..."

The campaigners plan interactions with the environment department, artistic submissions reimagining a green Mumbai, music concerts, virtual conferences etc, for necessary policy interventions.

Siddharth Singh, an energy and climate policy expert, said they need an urban renewal mission. "In the case of Mumbai, I believe that the flamingo can be a symbol of these changes, and indeed a symbol of the city itself."

The 21.9-hectare NRI Complex and 14-hectare TS Chanakya near the Thane creek flamingo sanctuary have been earmarked for the construction of residential, commercial buildings and a golf course. A record number of flamingos migrated there in April and May during the Covid-19 lockdown thanks to a lack of human activity.

Shavasthi Siva, an entrepreneur, said the way to steer change is to keep asking authorities for accountability. “Other than that, we are individually responsible for our environment in our everyday choices that contribute to sustainability.”

Proposed and under construction infrastructure projects threaten the remaining green lungs such as Aarey (393-acres slated for development) and the iconic south Mumbai coastline (111-hectares of the sea to be reclaimed for the coastal road project). Additionally, 28,951 illegal structures have been built inside as well as around the periphery of Sanjay Gandhi National Park, with over 25,000 structures inside the park, accounting for 11% of encroachments.

Keshabat said the recent proposal to declare 600-acre of Aarey as a forest is a step in the right direction. “...our campaign hopes to encourage similar changes.”

State forest minister Sanjay Rathod said they intend to declare mangrove forests in western suburbs as conservation reserves and enhance eco-tourism there. “We have expanded the buffer zone around Thane flamingo sanctuary to include more mangrove forests for protection. This is just the beginning of a host of measures planned for Mumbai.”

Link:- <https://www.hindustantimes.com/mumbai-news/citizens-collective-starts-biodiversity-by-the-bay-campaign-in-mumbai/story-59JmnLcpd8INln9RWBTv9L.html>