

Study: Volunteering can help save wildlife

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Participation of non-scientists as volunteers in conservation can play a significant role in saving wildlife including tigers in India, finds a new scientific research led by Duke University, USA, in collaboration with Wildlife Conservation Society and Centre for Wildlife Studies, Bengaluru. Credit: WCS India

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Society and Centre for Wildlife Studies, Bengaluru.

The study has shown that [citizen science](#) projects greatly contribute to 'increased environmental awareness among the general public'. It also reported direct impacts on conservation including - shift in formal profession by volunteers to become conservationists, initiation of new conservation organizations or groups, or just as 'opinion leaders' influencing their social circles towards the cause.

More than 100 'citizen scientists' who had volunteered with the longest-running tiger research program in the world, led by WCS in India, were surveyed by the authors. Since 1990s, over 4000 such volunteers have been trained by WCS to survey wildlife populations and local communities across several Indian states including Karnataka, Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Andhra Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and others.

Dr Erika Weinthal of Duke University, a co-author to the study titled 'Network environmentalism: Citizen scientists as agents for environmental advocacy' says, citizen science - defined as public participation in scientific research has been increasingly used in large scale data collection, and monitoring of environmental quality since the mid-1990s. "However, few studies have examined the individual-level motivations and impacts of citizen science participation. Accordingly, we evaluated the experiences of [citizen scientists](#) volunteering with the two organizations in Bangalore, India."

"Saving wildlife needs engagement of as many stakeholders as possible, and this includes the general public," said Dr Krithi K Karanth of WCS and a co-author. "The data show that conservation benefits of citizen science are far greater than previously recognized. Volunteer participants have, over the years, had direct impacts on conservation in numerous ways."

The study findings were published in the highly reputed international scientific journal *Global Environmental Change* this month.

The study findings

A number of past WCS volunteers have changed careers to become formally trained ecologists and conservationists. Dr Samba Kumar, currently a senior scientist with WCS was formerly a project manager with the Indian Space Research Organization. "I was always interested in wildlife. I started volunteering regularly in WCS surveys from 1989 and formally joined the WCS research team in 1994, going on to get my Doctorate working on ungulate populations. Since then, there has been no turning back," he said.

At least 15 volunteers established their own conservation groups fighting fiercely to protect wildlife in their neighbourhoods. DV Girish, a coffee planter has in the past two decades fought many battles against negative impacts on Bhadra Tiger Reserve through several NGOs he started including Bhadra Wildlife Conservation Trust , WildCane and Wild Cat-C.

"I had an inherent interest in wildlife from my early days, and I knew Bhadra from as early as mid-1970s but I was just a casual observer then," recalls Girish. "I wanted fight negative impacts on this fantastic tiger habitat but lacked direction and guidance. I started volunteering with the WCS in 1989 and got that direction. I not only saw the emotional side of conservation but also the scientific side, giving me greater understanding, focus, prioritization, and perspective."

Another long-time WCS-India citizen scientist Prakash Matada, a former business analyst, says he wanted to be a forest officer as a child. He began volunteering with WCS-India program in 2008, and eventually gave up his profession to start his own production company which works

on wildlife documentaries. "By volunteering, I could better understand conservation challenges, and the difference organizations like WCS make to save wildlife. Now I contribute by showcasing their stories," he said.

Recognizing the volunteers as opinion leaders, the study states that these motivated individuals seek pro-actively to learn about conservation. Even without formal shift, these opinion leaders can influence their social circle for a favourable action to further wildlife [conservation](#).

"Behavioural studies have indicated that people constantly look up to others to know how to act in a situation where they are unsure about acceptable behaviour. The opinion leaders learn a great deal through volunteering in program like ours, and develop greater 'self-efficacy', and pass on the learning to their social circles," added Dr Krithi K Karanth.

The study revealed several important impacts of volunteering with WCS and CWS. Over 80% of the respondents acknowledged increased knowledge and concern for [wildlife](#) rooted in science. More than 60% said that they were able to use the knowledge learned during volunteering with WCS-India in other aspects of their lives. Several also indicated greater spiritual understanding about life in general.

Provided by Wildlife Conservation Society

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