

India's teen climate champion Agastya heads for China

He is just 17, but tackling climate change and transforming poachers into forest guards to conserve the environment makes more sense to Agastya Muthanna than cramming for his Class 12 examinations next year.

Agastya is an Indian Climate Champion, chosen in an international initiative launched by the British Council in February. And his interest in development economics has earned him a place in the 'Green Journey' programme that takes him to China for a visit from July 14 to 30.

A volunteer with the Wildlife Association of South India (WASI), Agastya puts development economics into practice by persuading poachers, thieves of forest produce and destroyers of the ecosystem to become forest guards.

This, he tells them, will ensure a steady source of income, which they can augment through eco-tourism partnerships in and around Muthathi, 90 km from the IT hub of Bangalore.

With the help of enthusiastic young people like Agastya, WASI has implemented this socio-economic transformation in the Cauvery Wildlife Sanctuary and in the forests around the Jungle Lodges and Resorts hotel in the hills of Coorg.

'The poachers were making surprisingly little through timber and animal poaching,' Agastya said.

Agastya's parents Deepa and Nirad are nature lovers but their son is focused more on climate change, its implications and remedies.

'I became interested in climate change when I went scuba diving in the Andamans and for the first time saw its impact underwater, on corals,' Agastya told IANS.

He was certified as a diver when he was just 12.

From then on, he began learning more and more about climate change and development economics and sharing his knowledge with others.

'When the Al Gore movie first came out, I spoke to my principal and made him give me time-slots to speak to every class in my school between 9 a.m. and noon and showed them the movie,' Agastya said.

Former US vice president Al Gore's film 'An Inconvenient Truth' was released in 2006 and won an Oscar in the documentary category last year. Gore and the UN Inter-governmental Panel on Climate Change were jointly awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2007. India's Rajendra Pachauri heads the panel, as also the New Delhi-based The Energy and Resources Institute (TERI).

When he was in Class 10, Agastya also started a garbage segregation programme in school. After the system was in place, he got the school to get an energy audit done by TERI.

Agastya's 'Green Journey' will have him joining Climate Champions from China, Hong Kong and Japan in travelling by train around various sites of environmental interest in China.

Agastya and the other young ambassadors will also share their experiences with various organisations, schools and the media.

Agastya's itinerary includes a visit to China's National Climate Centre and the Tsinghua University, the Tsinghua Energy Efficiency Building, Beijing Planetarium, eco-buildings and parks in Shanghai, the Chongqing Energy Saving Centre and the Haishi Eco-Park among other places.

He will also travel to the Li Keng domestic waste incineration facility - the only one of its kind in Guangzhou province that incinerates waste for generating electricity.

All these sites showcase China's efforts to mitigate climate change and environmental degradation.

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