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CASE STUDY

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INDIA'S MITRAS: FRIENDS OF THE RIVER

How thousands of volunteers from all walks of life are working together to help protect the Ganga River and its tributaries

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Map of the Ganga river basin

Introduction

The Ganga river basin is home to more than 600 million people and spans over 1 million km², with most of the basin located within India. The basin plays a key role for India's environment, economy and culture. It is home to hundreds of aquatic species, including the endangered Ganges river dolphin. The basin is a key region for the production of agricultural commodities and is also home to multiple large cities and major industrial hubs. The river itself is sacred for Hindus and has an important socio-cultural role.

The Ganga river basin faces multiple challenges. These include: over-abstraction primarily for agriculture; flow disruptions due to barrages and dams; water pollution from urban, industrial and agricultural sources; habitat degradation; among others. WWF-India, in large part within the scope of the HSBC Water Programme, is working to create positive change within the Ganga basin as part of its 'Rivers for Life' programme. The work is primarily focused within the Upper Ganga and the Ramganga, a key tributary.

WWF is taking several different approaches, which include: sustainable water management (including assessing environmental flows and river basin management planning); biodiversity conservation; urban (e.g. reducing domestic water footprint) and industrial water stewardship (e.g. work on leather and metaware production); and climate change adaptation via the promotion of climate-smart agriculture and policy action.

One element of the programme cuts across all areas of work, and is the topic of this practice note: the Ganga and Ramganga Mitras (here referred to simply as Mitras for brevity). The word Mitra means 'friend' in Hindi. Mitras, friends of the river, are the result of an idea initiated by the programme and are now thousands strong. These volunteers can be individuals, organisations or groups, and have become involved in most aspects of the programme. The Mitras initiative has been particularly successful in terms of awareness-raising and implementation of programme activities; the team is now working to strengthen the Mitras' advocacy role via capacity-building and by structuring and federating the groups.

What did we do?

First established in 2013, the Mitras have become involved in most aspects of the Rivers for Life programme, but the groups' internal and overall structures are still a work in progress.

GOVERNANCE CONTEXT

In India, there is some involvement of communities in water management decision making at a more local level, but it often tends to be via single-focus (e.g. irrigation) or single-user (e.g. farmers) platforms. There is currently no room for participation (of communities but also of other water users) in basin-level management, which takes a very top-down approach and is only participatory in the most token sense – often limited to the government imparting information. In addition, there are no platforms allowing for constructive conversations between water use sectors. Among other problems, this has contributed to communities and other user groups lacking a sense of ownership over river conservation issues, and to a blame culture between sectors.

Another contextual issue is the fragmented nature of water management within India, whereby responsibility for different aspects relating to rivers and basins is split between multiple national-level ministries and state-level departments. Amendments to the Constitution of India in 1992 mandated the devolution of powers, finances and functions, including the

responsibility for designing and implementing programmes related to water or natural resources management. These moved from the state level to the Panchayati Raj institutions at district, urban, block and village levels; capacity gaps and differential stages of devolution remain a major challenge. Furthermore, this devolution has not been accompanied by a move towards more multi-stakeholder approaches.

The decision to form the Mitras was informed by this governance context. WWF instead envisioned a truly inclusive multi-stakeholder approach, involving various user groups, communities, government and businesses, in order to reflect the shared nature of water resources and water-related risks. WWF aimed to create an institutional mechanism bringing together different water users to discuss and collaboratively contribute solutions regarding water risk. The ultimate aim is that the Mitras will have the capacity and empowerment to advocate for change and emerge as prime change agents.

CHRONOLOGY AND COMPOSITION

WWF first established Mitras in the city of Moradabad, one of the biggest and most industrialised cities located on the banks of the Ramganga, in 2013. One of the initial activities Mitras got involved with was contributing to a survey of urban wetlands in and around Moradabad, a particularly important resource given the Ramganga's flow is primarily groundwater-fed and that much of the city's aquifers are currently over-abstracted.

Currently, there are Mitra groups in six districts within the basin: Moradabad, Bareilly, Hastinapur, Shahjahanpur, Bijnor, and Bhikiasen. In addition, WWF is establishing Mitra groups in Garhmukteshwar, Kanpur, Bithoor and Fatehpur. The groups are at various stages of maturity depending on when they were first formed; the Moradabad group is the most advanced. There are now around 4,000 Mitras in total, most of whom are from local communities – domestic users of water, teachers, students, and farmers. Very few industrial users are Mitras, despite the big impact their activities have on the river, a topic covered later. Mitras come from one of 23 stakeholder groups, which WWF has categorised as follows:

- Government (Irrigation, Forest, Fishing and Education Departments, police, government staff, paid volunteers, etc.)
- Panchayati Raj Institutions (village and city administration)
- Policy makers (District Magistrates, Member of Parliament, Members of Legislative Assembly, etc.)

Young Mitras



Teachers and their students in have been one of the groups most heavily involved in the Mitras initiative. There are over 1,900 Bal Ramganga Mitras (Young Friends of the River), from 45 schools in Moradabad.

Children learn about the river and get involved with the programme via activities such as exhibitions, debates, drawing competitions, documentary screenings, etc.

The involvement of students is important not only for the future of the Ramganga, but also in the shorter term because of the ability of children to influence their families and communities, and the media interest their involvement creates.

- Agriculture sector (farmers)
- Individuals (teachers, students, labourers, lawyers, fishers, etc.)
- Private sector
- NGOs, CBOs, Civil Defence
- Media

Mitras are unpaid volunteers. People are motivated to become Mitras for many different reasons, including: a feeling of connection to, responsibility and ownership for the river; a dependence on the river's resources for their livelihood and that of their communities; existing academic or scientific interest; religious motivations, etc.

SETUP OF THE MITRA GROUPS

Becoming a Mitra is a simple process, involving signing up to a simple set of commitments to protect river health; there is both a pledge (see box in the margin) and a sign-up form, which WWF uses to collect basic information about the Mitras' areas of interest, the time they are able to contribute, etc. Mitras must attend a minimum of three meetings before being able to sign up, and WWF records meeting attendance on an ongoing basis. Mitra numbers have reached the thousands in quite an organic way: for example, most of the urban Mitras signed up during events such as walkathons or other events where first WWF (and quite rapidly Mitras themselves) set up a stand, ran street theatre displays, etc. The farmer Mitras signed up as part of their villages' involvement in the programme's climate-smart agriculture work – detailed later – whose success has helped spread the word rapidly.

WWF has grouped the Mitras according to administrative boundaries in each of the Uttar Pradesh districts in which they can be found. Three of the district Mitra groups have an Advisory Committee (AC) with a decision making function; a fourth is being formed for the combined groups of Hastinapur and Garhmukteshwar (since these are geographically close) and a fifth AC is planned for a soon-to-be-launched Mitra group in Kanpur.

Advisory Committee members were chosen relatively early on: WWF held a series of Mitra meetings – for example in Moradabad the first meeting assembled over 800 people (some possibly hoping for financial remuneration), the second around 150 and the third around 60. At that stage, WWF sought volunteers to be part of an AC; this helped ensure the participation of truly committed individuals. The Moradabad district AC for example is composed of 26 people from around

Mitras pledge

"We will contribute to the efforts to maintain the Ramganga River pristine and clean.

We will strive to keep the Ghats of the Ramganga River free from polythene, e- waste and other pollutants. © WWF UK

We will conserve the aquatic biodiversity of the Ramganga River, and neither let ourselves nor anybody else pollute our Ramganga River.

We will work to provide a new life to the Ramganga River by becoming Ramganga Mitras."

the district – a mix of farmers, urban residents, industrial users – who were either self-selected or nominated (e.g. by the District Magistrate). Several AC members are Mitra ‘champions’ who play an important influencing role, as detailed later. Membership of the ACs is loosely controlled (by the AC and WWF at present) and tries to ensure that all members contribute sufficiently.

The ACs reach agreement by consensus: as yet, there has neither been a need nor a desire for voting to take place. Within the ACs themselves, all have equal volunteer status and there are no assigned roles such as Chair, Secretary, etc. This has been a conscious decision on the part of the Mitras, taken to avoid creating unhealthy power dynamics within the groups and giving undue influence to certain people. AC meetings are minuted and recently Mitras and WWF decided to start creating terms of reference for the ACs soon.

In terms of how the Mitras district groups are organised and structured, there are no formal structures beyond the ACs in existence yet. However, during a February 2016 meeting of Mitras from four districts (Shahjahanpur, Bareilly, Bijnor and Moradabad) Mitras agreed to form an umbrella basin-level AC composed of around 30 nominated members from the four districts. This will be the first step in the federation of the Mitras, with the purpose of increasing their ability to advocate for an influence change at the basin rather than just the local scale, a topic covered later.

ENGAGEMENT WITH MITRAS

WWF’s engagement with Mitras typically includes awareness raising, capacity building and implementation – often in that order, but not necessarily.

Awareness raising: At the start of the initiative, WWF took a lead role in awareness-raising activities, but as the Mitras have become more numerous and better-informed, they have been doing most of this work themselves. This work is detailed on page 9.

Capacity building: A first step prior to implementation has been for WWF to build capacity. So far, capacity building has mostly covered more technical topics (e.g. understanding threats, monitoring water quality, sustainable farming techniques, etc.), but will in future focus more on things like advocacy, influencing, communication and negotiating skills, as detailed on page 18.

Implementation: The next section provides more detail about some of the work Mitras have done on climate-smart agriculture, species conservation as well as monitoring of water

flows and quality. Often, implementation itself leads to raised awareness: for example, River Health Assessments gather information on activities communities notice taking place in or near the river, providing an opportunity to explain the negative impact of these on river health.

Engagement with the Mitras has not been a one-way process; indeed, the local knowledge the Mitras have provided – for example during the Moradabad wetlands survey or as part of the River Health Assessments (see below) – has been very valuable for advancing WWF and its partners' knowledge about the river basin.

What have we achieved?

The Mitras initiative has had several tangible achievements; for instance, Mitras are actively involved in gathering river health data, have taken up climate-smart agriculture techniques and are part of several freshwater species protection activities. Achievements in terms of policy advocacy are not yet as obvious, primarily because the initiative has been in place for a relatively short time.

ASSESSING RIVER HEALTH

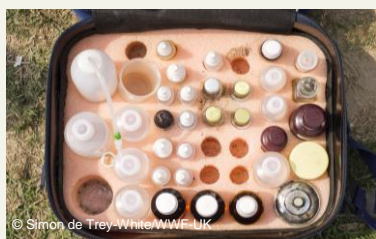
Mitras are heavily involved in assessing the health of the Ramganga and Ganga Rivers through the use of River Health Assessments (RHA). The RHA toolkit was created by WWF and measures five components of river health: water quality, biodiversity, flow, catchment health and community perception. RHAs are simple to use and include a testing kit which measures 14 water quality parameters. They also include a set of cards that prompt assessment of the five components, for example by confirming presence or absence of certain activities (e.g. waste dumping, industry, sand mining, riverbed farming, etc.) or indicator species. WWF created the paper cards in response to constraints such as lack of electricity at testing sites, while the use of photos allows for verbal and non-technical input from the Mitras.

WWF has trained Mitras to use this methodology. WWF has so far distributed 39 water quality testing kits to Mitra groups (with accompanying training sessions); approximately 71 people can confidently use them without further supervision. Monitoring at consistent sampling points (11 in total) is done three times per year: pre-monsoon, monsoon and post-monsoon. WWF then compiles results from a year of monitoring into a river health report card, which is presented to authorities by the Mitras (the first such report will be finalised later in 2017). A traffic light system allows for easy



© Simon de Trey-White/WWF-UK

Mitras using the water quality testing kit in Moradabad



© Simon de Trey-White/WWF-UK

Tara Devi



© Thomas Cristofolletti/Ruom/WWF-UK

Tara Devi is one of the most influential and engaged Mitras; she is a farmer. Her thoughts on what motivated her to become involved and on the impact of the climate-smart agriculture measures:

“I’ve seen cucumbers grow to abnormal sizes - the size of an arm – with just a shot of fertiliser and I’ve seen people suffer from lethal diseases because of polluted water from their use. WWF were offering a positive impact on our health, and the health of the river by using organic fertilisers that could easily be made.”

“After making the changes, we were surprised by the abundant crop supply and how the crops were able to withstand the destructive rains. We then used them during the subsequent wheat season to test them with a second crop; again, the same results! This motivated me to take the lead in making sure all of us Ramganga Mitras considered the new alternatives to help conserve the Ramganga River.”

interpretation of results. The report cards will be a key document to support the Mitras’ advocacy activities and are an important tool for empowerment.

RHAs have helped raise awareness among riparian communities, who might know there is pollution but not understand the extent of it. This tool has helped build the capacity of the Mitras, not only in terms of actual knowledge about river health but also by allowing access to and production of data about water, which may only otherwise be the preserve of centralised/expert bodies. WWF is also benefiting from the data gathered via citizen science, which has helped increase understanding of the state of and threats to the Ganga river basin but will also help assess the impacts of the Rivers for Life programme’s activities.

SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURE

Mitras are a central part of the Rivers for Life programme’s climate change adaptation pillar. This is being piloted in 39 villages spread across six districts, involving approximately 5,000 farmers in total – a proportion of these are Mitras. WWF first used a participatory rural appraisal methodology to help raise awareness among villagers of the threats facing the river and of the opportunities of water conservation, and has subsequently rolled out a suite of climate-smart agriculture (CSA) techniques.

The climate change adaptation work involves adopting water conservation practices, regenerating wetlands, installing groundwater recharge structures, application of micronutrients, reducing chemical runoff, introducing flood-resistant crop varieties, reducing damaging practices like riverbed farming, among other things. WWF has encouraged the adoption of organic fertiliser and pesticides as an alternative to chemical options. Both use no- or low-cost ingredients that are readily available in the villages: cow dung, cow urine, neem tree leaves, jaggery and gram flour.

Adoption of the sustainable agriculture methods is voluntary, with WWF only financially supporting the inputs for one crop per farmer. Demonstration of the effectiveness of the techniques first via demonstration plots and subsequently within villagers’ own fields has led to rapid uptake. Benefits to farmers include yield increases (30-40%), less water use and cost reductions because they have to buy fewer chemicals and because the raised groundwater table reduces fuel costs for pumping. Word of the benefits have spread, and nearby farmers often visit the CSA farmers (and in particular the Mitra farmers) to learn from them.

Several Mitras have expressed interest in producing larger quantities of the organic inputs and opening up shops to sell them, because they see the market opportunities that the demonstrable yield increases can bring. The willingness of the CSA farmers to take the risk of adopting new methods without guaranteed results has been one of the success factors behind this programme component. WWF has been working with women's groups in particular; an example of a particularly active female farmer Mitra is presented in the margin box.

In order to scale it up, WWF is currently engaged in policy advocacy to get the climate change adaptation framework adopted into several district-level plans and hopefully ultimately at state level. WWF presented a set of climate change adaptation recommendations – based on experiences in the 39 pilot villages – to district administrations for inclusion in their district plans. To date, one Uttar Pradesh district has included the bulk of our recommendations and two districts are considering them.

PROTECTING FRESHWATER SPECIES

Engagement with Mitras is vital for the conservation of freshwater species: physically closest to freshwater ecosystems, local communities can play a key role in monitoring changes, modifying their behaviour to reduce threats, and influencing policy makers to take action. Without their buy-in, conservation actions have a slim chance of long-term success. Although all of the Mitras' activities ultimately benefit freshwater species through water quality and flow improvements, the Mitras are also directly involved in conservation activities focusing on some of the Ganga basin's most important freshwater species: the Ganges river dolphin (*Platanista gangetica* ssp. *Gangetica*), the gharial (*Gavialis gangeticus*) and several species of turtle. These are some of the main focus species of the Rivers for Life programme because of their ecological function (the gharial and dolphin being at the top of the food chain), their precarious conservation status, and the role they can play as indicators of river health. Engagement with Mitras has varied depending on the species:

Turtles: At least six species of turtle lay their eggs in nests within sandy river banks and on river islands within the Ganga river basin, where they are vulnerable to riverbed (pallage) farming. Farmer Mitras (around 50 in total) contribute to conservation efforts by identifying nest locations and notifying WWF of their presence; since eggs are laid at night, it is invaluable to have local eyes on the ground before tracks are disturbed. Eggs are then removed and relocated to riverbank hatcheries by highly-trained WWF or government staff because



Turtle hatchery © Simon de Trey-White/WWF-UK



Mitras releasing turtle hatchlings © Archana Nirmal Kumar/WWF-India



Turtle hatchling release ceremony attended by Mitras © Archana Nirmal Kumar/WWF-India

of the delicate nature of the procedure and the legal protection afforded to some of the species. Turtle hatchlings are then released back into the river once they have reached a size that makes survival more likely. WWF involves these 'nest spotter' farmers in events such as hatchling releases. In addition, other Mitras such as school children and farmers have also been part of release ceremonies. This helps to familiarise them with the rivers' wildlife and the threats they face, but also helps to build a sense of ownership for the river and an understanding of the positive impact of the Mitras' work. So far, over 1,000 turtle hatchlings have been released as part of the Rivers for Life programme.

Ganges river dolphin: Mitras participated in the 2015 Uttar Pradesh Ganges River dolphin survey, alongside other community members, NGOs and government officials. This was the second such survey, the first one having taken place in 2012, and the national government has now committed to running the census annually using a participatory approach. Alongside the dolphin census, WWF also ran the 'My Ganga, My Dolphin' campaign to raise awareness of the importance of conserving the Ganges River dolphins, India's national aquatic animal.

Gharial: Local farmers WWF works with also keep a watch for fishing practices that would be harmful to dolphins (e.g. causing entanglement) as well as gharial (e.g. causing entanglement or disturbing basking animals). Furthermore, WWF also involves local people in the regular releases of captive-reared juvenile gharials within the Hastinapur Wildlife Sanctuary.

Fish: WWF has conducted workshops with fishing communities, in order to raise awareness about the impact of indiscriminate fishing on focus species' prey base, and of the need to release species accidentally caught in fishing nets (e.g. turtles).

AWARENESS RAISING

Mitras are taking an active role in educating fellow community members about the threats facing the river as well as possible solutions. This has been done as part of things like:

- Public events, e.g. in schools, parks, etc., where Mitras set up stands;
- Door-to-door campaigns;
- On-the-ground activities such as riverbank clean-up drives;

- The 2014 Moradabad wetland survey, where Mitras worked with WWF and the local government to help identify and map existing and former wetland areas in and around the city;
- Practical demonstrations of agricultural practices;
- The Moradabad Water Footprint Campaign, launched in 2016, which aims to reduce the water footprint of 1,000 households by 20%. In the first three months of the campaign, 1,160 households signed up for this campaign and calculated their water footprint; the next step is to implement steps to improve water use efficiency. This campaign has spurred individual as well as collective action by the Mitras and has inspired them to influence more individuals in the city to change their water consumption patterns.

WWF created a set of information panels that are kept in the Moradabad Chaupal (interpretation centre), but are also brought to events etc. by the Mitras. The Mitras have sufficient understanding of the science to be able to explain them to members of the public; this ability to demystify some of the technical content has helped increase awareness among others.

As a specific example, although there are not yet many Mitras from industries, some of the ones that have been involved so far have been very active; one, Jamshed Aktar, is actually one of the Mitra 'champions' that have been so central to the success of the initiative. He is actively involved in raising awareness among his metalware sector peers, having for example influenced 50 of his peers to join the Mitras.

OTHER ACTIVITIES

In addition to the citizen science, sustainable agriculture, freshwater species and awareness-raising work, Mitras have also been involved in other Rivers for Life programme activities.

The Mitras are playing a crucial role in the stakeholder engagement that forms part of the creation of the Ramganga River Basin Management Plan (RBMP), which WWF is currently finalising. WWF held consultations at district level, including with the Mitras, to present the RBMP situation analysis and the proposed draft RBMP for feedback. Parallel research work on the benefits that rivers bring to communities among others also fed into the RBMP process, incorporating the Mitras' views about their connection to the river and what their vision of a healthy river is. Although it will be challenging to get the RBMP adopted by government, it could deliver enormous benefits in terms of regulatory and funding support

for the actions needed to implement it. The RBMP will be a dynamic document; in future, it is hoped that the federated Mitras would 'own' the Plan and be able to make changes to it.

Impact and achievements

In sum, the Mitras initiative has been very successful in terms of the total number of people that have come on board as well as the existence of a small yet very influential number of 'champions'. There have been many achievements at the local and project level, as detailed previously.

In terms of wider reach, there has been some recognition of and buy-in for Mitras work by government, particularly at the local level; for example, one district so far has adopted WWF's climate change adaptation recommendations into its district plans. However, influence at the Uttar Pradesh, Ganga basin and national levels has been more limited; the "challenges" section on page 14 details some of the reasons behind this. There have however been some successes; for example, the national government asked WWF to share some of its experiences of the work with the Mitras in January 2016.

WWF's points about true public participation appear to have been taken on board to some extent, and WWF was asked to input into the concepts for the Ganga Vichar Manch and the Ganga Grams, two government initiatives within the National Mission for Clean Ganga. The Ganga Vichar Manch is an online portal created for initiating a dialogue between various stakeholders about the Ganga, while the Ganga Grams are a government initiative to work with riparian communities and landowners through the creation of 1,600 model villages. These villages include some of the ones where Mitras have been farming sustainably; the initiative will focus heavily on improving sanitation, household waste collection and the cremation of human remains. WWF is positive about the potential of these two initiatives to create stakeholder dialogue and participation in future.

What helped to ensure our success?

First established in 2013, the Mitras have become involved in most aspects of the Rivers for Life programme, but the groups' internal and overall structures are still a work in progress. Several factors have contributed to the success of the Mitras initiative:

Having strong government support at the city and district level – As detailed on page 2, the current water governance arrangement in India remains quite top-down. As

such, it has been particularly important for the whole Rivers for Life programme, including the Mitras initiative, to get strong support from the government. WWF has found it particularly valuable to bring government representatives and Mitras together as a way of building relationships and understanding of each other's purpose and challenges, for example during public events or as part of the Moradabad wetland survey. In many cases, individual politicians or civil servants have played a key role thanks to their personal commitment to the issues, highlighting the importance of building personal relationships.

Tangible actions have helped Mitras to engage – Things like clean-up drives, the sustainable agriculture practices, the nest spotting etc. have been vital in terms of getting Mitras on board. Another example is the 2014 Moradabad wetland survey, after which the Mitras initiative obtained real momentum: it showed the Mitras that river protection didn't just involve discussions and meetings, but also actual work on the ground through which they could contribute to the programme and become more connected to the ecosystems on which they depend.

'Champions' coming forward and helping to drive the movement – Mitra champions include a farmer engaged in CSA work (see box on page 7), a village head who has convened many of his peers, an influential teacher with a lot of reach in Moradabad, and an industrialist who overcame initial scepticism and has brought others on board. Through their commitment, existing professional and personal networks and activism, these champions have each helped influence a lot of others to become involved and also act as highly informed and passionate figureheads for the movement.

The Chaupal acting as a physical focal point – The Ramganga Chaupal knowledge and interpretation centre was established in Moradabad in 2013. The Chaupal is used to host some Mitra meetings and run outreach activities such as training sessions (on topics such as water footprint, wetland management, sustainable agriculture), film screenings, student & media workshops, etc. There are 3D models of key species and display posters highlighting the current state of the river and potential approaches to conservation. The team is now hoping to establish such spaces in different locations around the basin.

Adapting engagement strategies to local circumstances – For example, WWF sends out mass text message to all Mitras who have provided a mobile phone number, approximately two to three times per month. These SMSs provide updates on upcoming events, successes, etc. and are a practical way to reach very widely dispersed and



The Chaupal in Moradabad



© WWF-India

sometimes isolated communities that don't have internet access. Many Mitras respond to these SMSs.

Connecting Mitras to the wider issues in the basin –

Taking Mitras to turtle hatchling and gharial juvenile release events helps motivate them and also illustrates the connection between their water quality improvement work and the river's wildlife.

Relating to the Mitras based on the different reasons for their involvement –

The programme addresses many issues other than conservation. For example, water scarcity and drinking water quality is a particular concern for Mitras in the rural villages, while one industrialist became involved because of his concern for the welfare of the metalware artisans and for religious reasons.

Public events and symbols boosting membership and creating unity –

For example, WWF organised a walkathon in Moradabad in 2013 which was attended by 2,000 people, demonstrating the importance of the work and helping get new Mitras on board. The Rivers for Life logo, which explicitly mentions the Mitras, has proved popular and its use on t-shirts and caps creates recognition for members and a common identity.



The 2013 Moradabad walkathon
© WWF-India



The Mitras' logo, featuring the Ganges river dolphin, a turtle and the gharial

Peer-to-peer awareness-raising as a priority –

Whether at public city events or for sustainable agriculture demonstrations, having Mitras speak directly to other Mitras has been WWF's goal. This not only makes Mitras more receptive to the messages but also helps build the capacity of the Mitras and increases the chances they will carry on once WWF support is no longer available.

Knowing when to stop – The Mitras now number in the thousands, and have probably reached quite a critical mass in terms of potential influence at the district level. As will be detailed later, WWF is now focusing on building the capacity of existing Mitras rather than increasing their numbers. Given the existing governance context, as well as the advocacy role the Mitras are intended to play, this focus on capacity is essential.

WWF not imposing its own views on the Mitras –

Instead, the Mitras have for example come up with their own vision, decided on the creation of the umbrella basin-level Advisory Committee and chosen not to have set roles within the Advisory Committees. This is yet another strategy to increase the legitimacy of Mitra decisions and help build their long-term sustainability.

Filling a governance-related gap– The multi-stakeholder approach advocated by WWF through the Mitras responds to a

specific need within the Indian governance context, where true participation is lacking and dialogue between water users is almost non-existent. The Mitras would perhaps be less compelling if there were alternative participatory opportunities available.

Some challenges

Most of the challenges the Mitras initiative faces basically boil down to two things: the aim for Mitras to be able to advocate for change and the question of their sustainability beyond the timescales of the Rivers for Life programme. Most of the challenges listed below impact both things: for example, if the Mitras are not sufficiently representative of water users, they will not have sufficient legitimacy or influence to advocate for change, and will face significant barriers to their long-term sustainability.

Mitras are not representative in terms of their composition – As explained previously, Mitras are for now mostly farmers, schoolchildren and urban residents. Other categories are much less well represented, in particular industrial users, the media and politicians; WWF has identified this as an area for improvement. One of the challenges with getting more industrial users on board has been their “wait and see” approach. Gender representativeness is also an issue: although several of the Mitra champions are women, in general most of the Mitras are men, for various reasons linked to local customs.

Mitras have no legal status, which links to the question of legitimacy and sustainability – Some legal options are available. Official registration of the Mitras would enable to access government funds allocated to protection of the Ganga, helping to ensure their financial sustainability. It could also potentially increase the legitimacy of the Mitras in the eyes of the government. However, obtaining legal status is no silver bullet; experience in the Mara basin in East Africa has shown that community water user associations, although enshrined in national legislation, still require a lot of capacity building and still face many challenges in terms of engaging with powerful actors. In addition, registration would require the kind of named roles (e.g. Chair) that Mitras have so far been reluctant to adopt.

Policy advocacy remains a major challenge for the Mitras – Impressive as the Mitra numbers are, they have not so far translated into enough legitimacy or influence for the MSP work. An important area of work within the Rivers for Life programme is the work on e-flows; Mitras have so far only

The scale of the challenge



© WWF-India

Waste from leather tanneries



© WWF-India

Low flows



© Anne-Claire Loftus/WWF-UK

Sand mining



© Simon de Trey-White/WWF-UK

Riverbed farming

peripherally been involved, primarily through the inclusion of e-flows assessment within the RHAs. The RHA report cards will be a big opportunity to help build the case for e-flows implementation.

There is currently no institutional space for the Mitras to engage in river basin management – This limits the ability of Mitras to advocate for change. Despite government support at a primarily local level, there is as of yet insufficient buy-in from government at the state and national scales, challenging the mainstreaming of Mitras and their inclusion into the dialogue. This is one of the main focus areas for WWF's own advocacy work. An added challenge is that of getting the Mitras to see the need to have this institutional space: indeed, individual water user groups understand the water-related risk in their own sector or area, but still do not fully grasp the shared nature of water resources and water risk.

Capacity gaps are a challenge for advocacy and sustainability – The primary capacity gaps relate to knowledge of available options, advocacy, negotiation and influencing decision makers. One example is that it was hoped that each Mitra could 'recruit' many more peers, but this has not been the case; individuals lack the adequate influencing skills. Another example is the Moradabad Advisory Committee: the Moradabad Conservation Committee invited representation from the AC as far back as 2013, but this has not yet happened because more capacity building of the Mitras is required before they can meet on a more equal footing. Finally, WWF has identified fundraising and financial management as a key capacity gap within the Mitras, with implications for their sustainability given the current WWF-managed funding for many Mitra activities.

Engagement with government takes a long time and is not easy – One example is the constant turnover of government officials which makes it difficult to retain constant support; another is the difficulty of sustaining the interest of district officials, particularly during election processes. Although government at the state and national level has made some positive noises, it still remains to be seen if the Mitras and multi-stakeholder principles will be taken up and mainstreamed. In addition, although the commitment of certain government representatives has been vital for the programme, this is also a risk since the support is not yet institutionalised. WWF has been sharing stories about the Mitras, but ultimately the power still rests with the government; they might take some ideas on board but not all – for example, the current Ganga clean-up initiative is still very top-down. For the RBMP currently being created, there is a risk

that the government may not include Mitras in its implementation.

WWF is still playing a central role in relation to the Mitras – The Rivers for Life team is the glue that holds it all together, despite the fact that Mitras are doing some of their own events, etc. WWF is driving forward some of the work on the ground, for example water stewardship and climate-smart agriculture, as well as the advocacy with government and managing the relationships between Mitra groups.

Mitra champions' achievements and other successes are insufficiently shared – The SMS campaign has been a good way to reach many Mitras, as detailed previously. However, there hasn't yet been enough public recognition of the vital work of Mitra champions. Very positive responses to what has been done show the importance of recognition for boosting confidence, ensuring long-term engagement, attracting new members (including female Mitras) and generally for publicising the initiative.

A key point to note is that many of these challenges relate to the relative newness of the Mitras initiative, which was only established in 2013. At a 2016 internal WWF workshop about multi-stakeholder partnerships, WWF-India was able to learn from the example of the Mara basin in East Africa. There, community water user groups are mandated by law; initially, it would take around 13 years for new groups to become self-sustaining, with much of that time needed for capacity-building. With experience, the Mara team has reduced the total time to approximately six years – a big improvement, but still a lengthy process. It is important not to underestimate the time required to establish effective and sustainable multi-stakeholder processes.

Where will we go from here?

The main focus for WWF going forward is to address the challenges listed above linked to advocacy and sustainability.

IMPROVING MITRA REPRESENTATIVENESS

Continued commitment of active industrial users should also help win over more sceptical individuals and groups; finally, other Rivers for Life activities making improvements in the metalware sector will also contribute to raising awareness.

STRUCTURING AND FEDERATING THE MITRAS

Designing an institutional framework for the Mitras in order to create a space for engagement in river basin management on an equal footing and in a socially, financially and legally

Mitras vision

The Mitras created the following vision in 2016; it is a dynamic vision, subject to revision based on the Mitras' own needs.

"We call for the conservation of the environment;

We call for a revolution to restore our Ramganga to its past glory (pure and unfettered).

From oceans to the Everest, nature calls us to conserve its lifelines;

We have to conserve our wetlands, rivers, and forests to save ourselves."

sustainable way is one of WWF's main priorities. This will help ensure Mitra influence beyond the local scale, at basin level.

One of the key challenges to river conservation in India is multiplicity of institutions dealing with river governance. Various government agencies have mandates towards specific functions and this often leads to overlaps, lacunae and other coordination challenges. In order to deal with this, WWF-India – as part of the Rivers for Life programme – has supported three districts in the Ramganga river basin to initiate an umbrella committee called the Ramganga Conservation Committee (CC). The Ramganga CC, chaired by the District Magistrate, is an overarching body that comprises official representatives from various government agencies at the local level such as the District Forest Department, Chief Development Officer, the Urban Local Body, the Urban Development Authority, the District Industries Centre and the Pollution Control Board as well as representatives from local academia, civil society and WWF-India.

The CCs have had varying degrees of success, depending on the willingness of the acting District Commissioner to get involved and hold regular meetings; the CC should meet once every six months in order to deliberate and decide upon various issues regarding Ramganga conservation in the district. In Moradabad, the CC was instrumental in adoption of wetlands within the city; this CC has also taken decisions on campaigns to be conducted within the city, interventions such as soil testing in rural areas and other matters which require coordination between various agencies. The uptake of these CCs was one of the suggestions made to the Group of Secretaries on Ganga Rejuvenation by WWF-India. The formation of District Ganga Committees in all districts of the Ganga basin has been recommended in the report submitted.

In addition, WWF has been advocating for the creation of a state-level (Uttar Pradesh) umbrella CC. The aim is that ultimately the Mitras (via representatives of the planned umbrella basin-level Advisory Committee) will be able to join this planned state-level CC, once their capacity has been built to the point where they can interact with the other more powerful actors on a more equal footing.

Small groups have formed organically linked to particular themes within the wider programme, for example RHAs or the climate-smart agriculture work. WWF is currently assessing the capacity of these groups and the individuals within them, with the aim of turning them into more formal working groups.

BUILDING MITRAS' CAPACITY

The focus for WWF is now on strengthening existing Mitra groups rather than adding to the numbers. Capacity building will focus on things like negotiation, advocacy and influencing skills, as a response to observed deficiencies.

In India, laws are particularly complicated, making it more likely for less powerful groups to be side-lined. Providing information and building Mitras' skills would help them make more aware of which authorities to report things to and how to approach the judiciary system, and would provide useful scientific and governance-related knowledge in relation to river health.

There will also be a continued focus on technical skills with ongoing training on River Health Assessments for example. WWF is exploring the use of capacity assessment tools that will help assess the current status and gaps within the different groups as well as monitor progress in response to training.

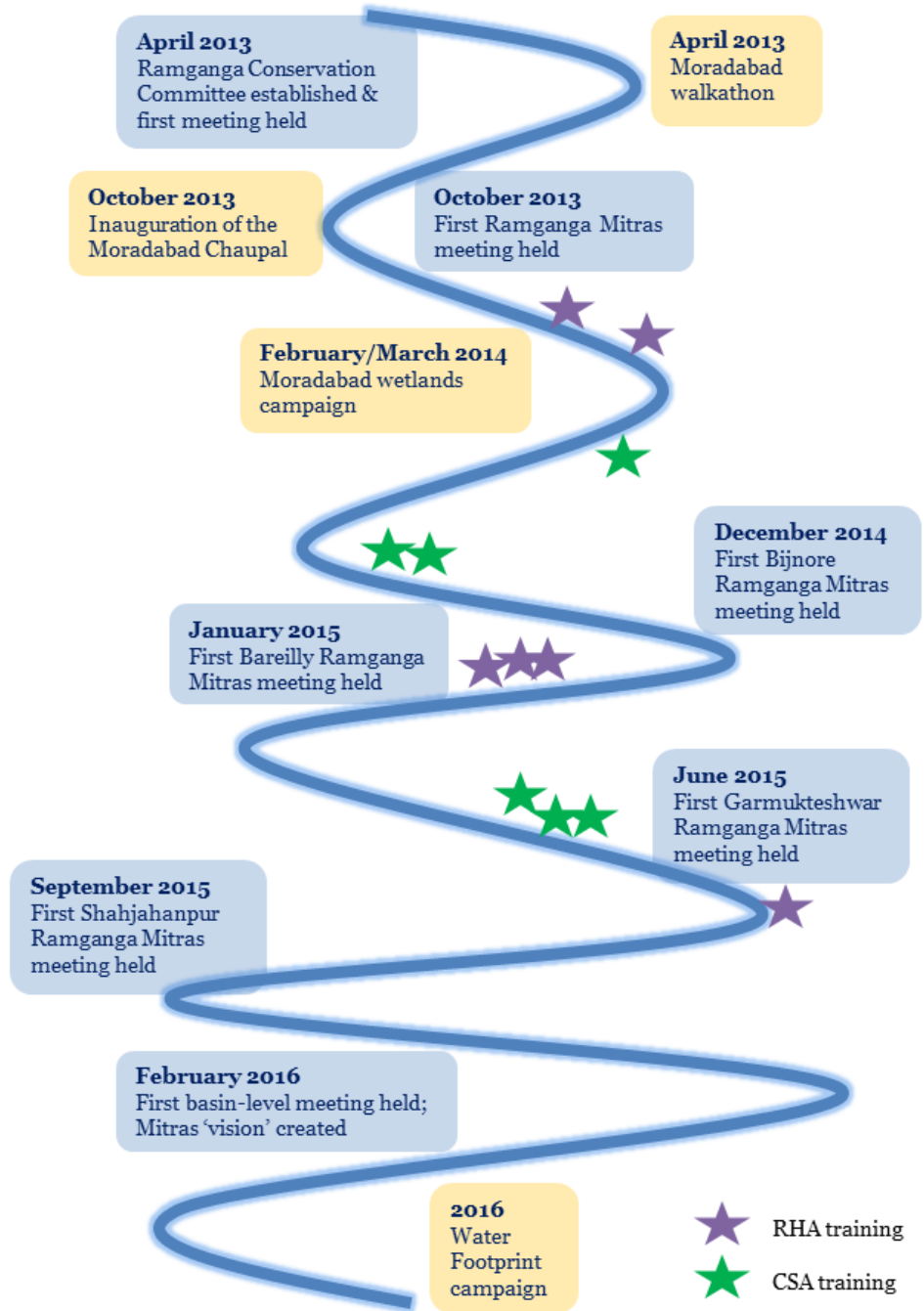
Through empowerment and capacity building, the aim is to enable the Mitras to for example be able to leverage and not be disempowered by national government initiatives, programmes and missions, such as the current one focusing on the Ganga's rejuvenation. Indeed, such national initiatives can be an opportunity (in terms of funding, scale and reach) as well as a risk (in terms of approaches chosen).

INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL COMMUNICATION

Finally, WWF will continue to raise the public profile of the Mitras and promote better communication within and among Mitra groups. Externally, existing and new champions will continue to be figureheads for the Mitras, and their achievements will be recognised, potentially via awards or similar mechanisms. Efforts will also be made to step up sharing of information and achievements with the media; briefings to them and other stakeholders will help raise the profile of the Mitras.

Internally, Mitras will be exposed to river conservation work being done by other Mitra groups (this has already started, with farmer and urban Mitras attending hatchling releases for example) and others within the basin but maybe even in other parts of the country, budget allowing. A regular newsletter for the Mitras will begin soon.

Mitras timeline



FOR MORE INFORMATION

Contact the WWF-India team

	<p>Why we are here To stop the degradation of the planet's natural environment and to build a future in which humans live in harmony with nature.</p>
<p>panda.org</p>	