

# Schoolchildren turn wetland warriors

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Students spread the word in their localities to fight city's 'ignorance'



Students of Mahadevi Birla World Academy at the East Calcutta Wetlands. (Sanjoy Chattopadhyaya)

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A group of schoolchildren is standing up for the East Calcutta Wetlands in the face of real estate plunder and policy blunders. Kriti Gulgulia, a Class XI student at Mahadevi Birla World Academy, is one among several schoolchildren going around their neighbourhoods to raise awareness about how crucial the wetlands are to Calcutta's survival.

Their campaign has been an eye-opener: many Calcuttans apparently did not even know of the existence of a 12,500-hectare sprawl of wetlands bordering the Bypass and beyond. "I have spoken to many people in the shopping malls along Camac Street and nearby who had no idea about the wetlands despite some of them living in the city for up to 40 years," said Kriti, a resident of the Middleton Row neighbourhood.

**According to Kriti, widespread ignorance about the wetlands acting as a natural treatment plant for the city's waste wasn't as worrying as the incredulous responses of some. She and her friends have encountered Calcuttans who think it is a waste of time fighting the real estate invasion of the wetlands. "People trying to convince us how futile our efforts were really hurt," she said. But the students from Mahadevi Birla are not giving up. Class XI student Prakriti Boral said the movement would become stronger if they could get people to just start talking about it. The group has already collected about 3,000 signatures in two phases, besides engaging fellow students in discussions on the campaign. The East Calcutta Wetlands have been recognised by the Ramsar Convention as one of the rare natural-drainage mechanisms in the world. The wetlands naturally filter 250 million litres of sewage every day, besides being a fish and vegetable hub. "A visit to the wetlands is a more real-world experience than reading about the environment in textbooks alone. By speaking about it, we have created the urge among students to visit the place and do their bit as citizens," said geography teacher Sudeshna Ghosh, who took the initiative to get students interested in visiting the wetlands. The trip was organised by the Society for Creative Opportunities and Participatory Ecosystems, which helps engage schoolchildren in conservation programmes.**

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