

A call to wage a war on plastic as India is set to host UN World Environment Day 2018 on June 5.

Ragpickers looking for recyclables at a garbage dump in New Delhi on Monday | Photo Credit: [Sushil Kumar Verma](#)

For more than 25 years, Ram Nath has lived on the banks of the Yamuna River under a 19th-century iron bridge. Each morning, the wiry man walks a few steps from his makeshift hut and enters the black, sludgy waters of one of India's most polluted rivers. He is fishing for trash. "This is the only work we have," said the 40-year-old, sorting through a pile of plastic bottles, bags, and cast-off electronics.

India, which hosts UN World Environment Day on June 5, can use all the help it can get. This year's theme is "Beat Plastic Pollution."

With more than 15 million people, New Delhi and its surrounding cities produce an estimated 17,000 tons of trash daily. That requires immense dumps, hills of stinking trash that measure up to 50 meters tall. "All these products which we use because of convenience take many hundreds of years" to even partially decompose, said Chitra Mukherjee, an environmental expert.

Ms. Mukherjee, who has spent years creating localised efforts to curb plastic pollution credits the Central government for making waste management and pollution a more serious issue. "It is a collaborative effort between not only bureaucrats, but researchers and environmentalists," she said.

Paper straw

Some restaurants in New Delhi are doing away with plastic straws and replacing them with paper straws. That's largely because of Aditya Mukarji, a student who launched his campaign after seeing a video of two veterinarians trying to remove a plastic straw from a turtle's nose. "People listen more to children bringing up environmental concerns," said Mukarji, who has helped replace more than 500,000 plastic straws at restaurants and hotels.

If nothing else, India hosting the World Environment Day has made environmental protection a hot topic at least briefly in a country where trash is everywhere. Tuesday will see numerous official environmental gatherings across India, clean up campaigns along the Yamuna and mall food courts agreeing to forgo plastic plateware for one day.

The hope is that everything doesn't go back to normal on Wednesday.

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Mandatory segregation and recycling of plastic waste must be implemented before it is eventually phased out

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