GUIDEBOOK ON
ENVIRONMENTAL JOURNALISM

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Sri Lanka Press Institute

GUIDEBOOK ON ENVIRONMENTAL JOURNALISM

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The Sri Lanka Press Institute serves as a leading institution dedicated to media development and ethics in Sri Lanka. It provides training for journalists, builds young journalists through the Sri Lanka College of Journalism, promotes self-regulation within the media industry through the Press Complaints Commission of Sri Lanka, and advocates for free, independent, and responsible journalism. The Sri Lanka Press Institute is committed to professionalising journalism and advocating for media freedom and nurturing democracy in the country.

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INTRODUCTION

There are many different types of journalism practised across the world; whether it be in print, electronic, or the recently popular digital media, environmental journalism and reporting holds importance at present as a rise in the adverse effects of human actions on the environment are witnessed.

The environment is a prominent and trending topic and the effects of climate change, global warming, sustainable development, and the future of humankind are often connected to the wider conversation on the environment. All available global assessments regarding the planet's health indicate that humans have impacted its natural process, and in some cases, beyond recovery. Despite this, environmental reporting is sometimes not considered a significant area of journalism.

This does not mean that reporting on environmental issues should be pushed to the back nor that it should be done without standards or accountability. There are certain guidelines to be followed in environmental journalism, in addition to the standard rules of journalism. This Guidebook on Environmental Journalism lays down the fundamentals of environmental reporting that helps to improve skills as an environmental journalist.

What is the purpose of this guidebook?

First and foremost, environmental journalists are expected to be advocates for nature and for sustainable change. Informed society, which is the key purpose of journalism, is fundamental to environmental conservation, responsible consumption, and management. However, trying to convince the general public of the importance of protecting the environment is no easy feat. People have been conditioned to think that natural resources are infinite and at their disposal. The abuse of these resources is not considered an important enough issue to be reported on and discussed.

Many journalists covering the environment face one or more of the following challenges, which will be discussed in this guidebook:

1. Lack of specific training required to cover environmental reporting
2. Limited access to data, scientific knowledge, and expert opinions
3. The disconnect between environmental journalists and environmental experts/activists
4. Differences in opinion and unresolved issues
5. Environmental reporting being deprioritised over other subjects such as politics, economy, terrorism, poverty, etc.

The aim of this guidebook is to recognise these challenges and to provide guidance on how to tackle them. Each story is unique and different and must be reported in a specific manner to the identified target audience(s) This guidebook identifies some of the more persistent gaps in environmental reporting, provides fundamental guidelines on how these may be addressed, gives an explanation of key words in environmental journalism, and lists useful resources, thereby providing journalists a range of tools to make a difference in their writing.

ENVIRONMENT AND THE MEDIA

Journalism is vital to society as it provides accurate and reliable facts which can lead to informed decision–making. It is a professional discipline which assembles and verifies facts prior to the dissemination of information.

Many studies have shown that the media magnifies the perception of the public on environmental risk, in turn affecting pro-environmental behaviour (Xu & Han, 2019). Thus, it is up to the journalist reporting on the environment to provide accurate information to the public to increase awareness and target for public mobilisation which leads to public engagement and empowerment.

The ABCs of journalism – accuracy, brevity, and clarity - followed by ***sensitivity*** and ***giving a voice to the vulnerable*** are the main points followed by a journalist when writing a story.

In layman's terms, journalism is about reporting accurate facts to the public to keep them informed. If they receive the correct information in a timely manner, they can then make informed decisions, change behaviour, increase awareness, and influence policy. In other words, a journalist does not write to impress but to express.

With environmental reporting, the foundations of journalism remain the same. Certain additional elements are included in order to bring about a wholesome story which will inform the masses as well as to ensure that the journalist themselves become an advocate for the voiceless.

An environmental journalist carries the burden of having to play a unique role to aid in finding solutions to the world's environmental issues including degradation and destruction of habitat, climate change, and other calamities. Moreover, environmental journalists should also encourage environmental education and raise awareness among the public on environmental issues through their work.

Why is environmental journalism important?

The simplest answer is the fact that the journalist who is reporting the story will be speaking on behalf of the environment and of the affected parties due to environmental degradation and pollution.

For instance, the human-elephant conflict (HEC) is one of the main socio-economic and environmental issues in Sri Lanka. It receives considerable attention and in this scenario, a journalist reporting on an elephant attack which resulted in the death of a human must take great care in how they report the story.

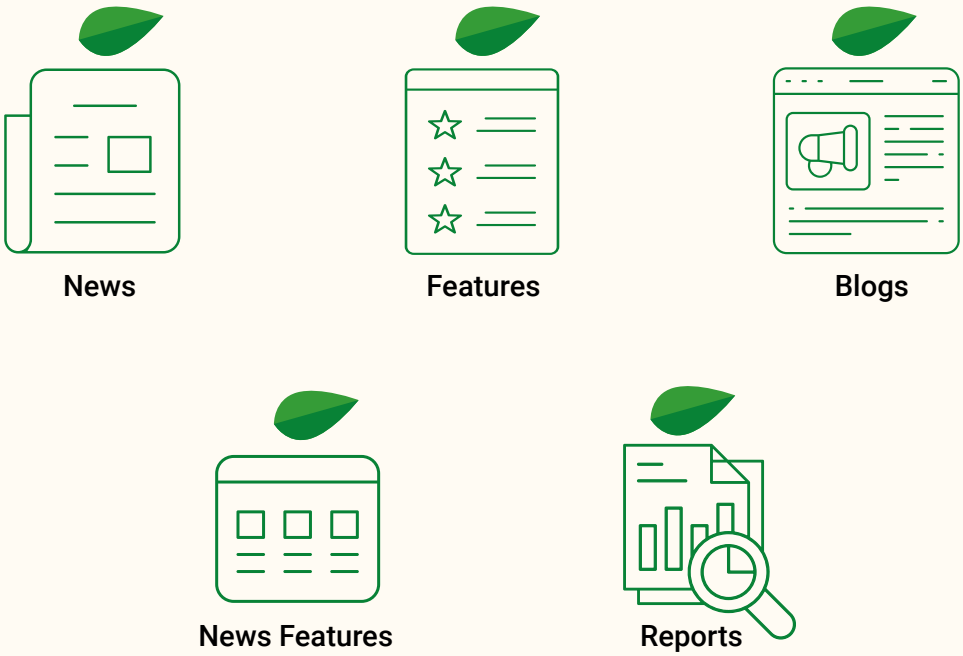
The manner in which environmental news is reported will have a direct impact on how the public reacts to it, acts upon it, and in the long run, how government policies are made.

Thus, all environmental journalists need to keep the following norms in mind, in addition to the basics of journalism.

Issues faced by journalists reporting on environmental issues

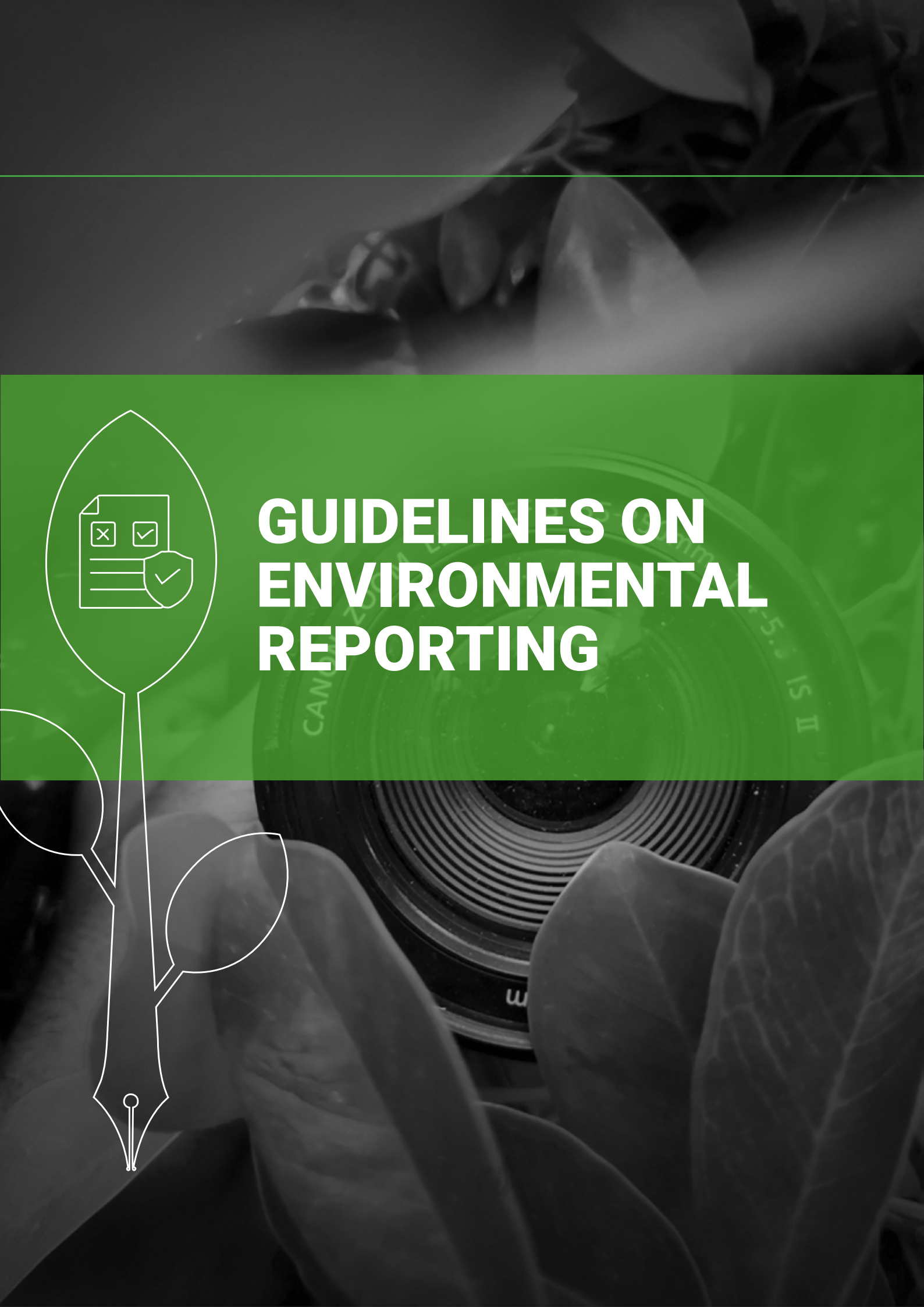
- Limited space or airtime set aside for environmental reporting
- News articles or reports will not be published due to various external factors
- Difficulty in obtaining accurate facts and evidence
- The timeliness of the news reports
- Obtaining relevant sources
- Complex questions regarding modern environmental issues
- Difficulty in discerning the scientific aspect of the report
- Threats due to political or other external influences

Types of environmental news



The above-mentioned news types will focus on one or more of the following themes when it comes to environmental reporting:

1. Destruction and degradation of the environment (deforestation, environmental disasters, loss of habitat, etc.)
2. Environmental issues and solutions (pollution, sustainable development, etc.)
3. Climate change
4. Conflicts between humans and wildlife (Human-Elephant Conflict, Human - Crocodile conflict, Human - Leopard conflict, etc)
5. Environment legislation (laws/regulations)
6. New discoveries and innovations
7. Local policies, standards, local laws, gazettes, framework, action plans, master plans, international conventions, processes and summits



GUIDELINES ON ENVIRONMENTAL REPORTING

When environmental reporting in Sri Lanka is regarded objectively, the rift between standardised reporting practices and how news is actually presented becomes apparent. Through this, the disconnect between journalists and environmental experts/activists becomes evident, in addition to political bias that affects environmental reporting in Sri Lanka.

Story pitching

Stories can be pitched in several different ways, depending on the content, the target group, and the organisation publishing the work. However, one thing to keep in mind is when and how to pitch. As the space given for environmental reporting is limited, it is crucial to pitch a story to an editor or producer in a timely manner that maximises the reach and impact of the story. Some examples are:

- Days dedicated to the environment (World Earth Day, World Environment Day, International Day of Clean Air for Blue Skies, International Monkey Day, International Day for Preventing the Exploitation of the Environment in War and Armed Conflict, etc.)

- During times when a major environmental summit is taking place (UN Climate Change Conference, UN Biodiversity Conference, UN Ocean Conference, etc.)

- When environmental issues become a trending topic due to current local or meteorological incidents (Heavy rains, floods, hurricanes, deforestation, HEC, etc.)

- Utilising regular time slots/space in programs/ newspapers for environmental issues

It is essential for journalists to visit relevant locations in person whenever possible when they report stories rather than gathering the facts over the phone. This will enable them to form a true picture of the issue. For instance, whether the authorities are doing something illegal or wrong or that the experts are providing them with facts versus their opinions. It is highly encouraged that journalists provide on - the ground reports and cover all sides of a story in order to provide an accurate reporting of the incidents.

Fundamental guidelines for environmental reporting

Another major concern between environmental journalists and environmental experts/activists is that many journalists do not understand the gap between where the public interest lies as opposed to the views/opinions that activists or experts wish to bring to the attention of the public.

From the journalist's perspective, they only want to report an incident – yet often they get tangled up in the politics of the issue or debates amongst activists and experts. This problem could be easily averted by following a few simple guidelines, and incorporating them into the relevant situation.

1. **Ask the correct questions**
   It is essential that journalists ask the correct

questions when speaking to experts in order to bridge the gap between what has to be reported and what is considered to be the most attention-grabbing story. This requires a level of preparation on the part of the journalist because if the correct questions are not asked, the actual story is lost.

For instance, if a dead whale is washed ashore, the news must go beyond the fact that a whale was washed ashore. The article should look into how often this happens and whether there is a reason which goes beyond the obvious.

2. Delve deep

History also plays a major role in environmental journalism. To understand the present, it is important to understand the circumstances of the past which led to the present.

The best example is the human-elephant conflict (HEC) in Sri Lanka. Why did reports on elephants coming into human settlements become more frequent in recent times? How can the damage caused by the human-elephant conflict be assessed?

To understand the answers to these questions, one must look at the history of humans encroaching on the habitats of wild elephants, thereby minimising their habitat and foraging space. One must investigate the development projects carried out by the Government in an ad hoc manner and consult experts on their impact on wildlife and their habitats. Discovering the root causes is fundamental to deriving sustainable solutions. The technical term used in this respect is "Root Cause Analysis (RCA)".

3. Expert opinion

When writing an article on the environment or an incident related to the environment, it is necessary to obtain the opinion from an expert in the field. The responsibility of the journalist is to convey that opinion in a manner that is easily grasped by the public. They must be careful not to present their own opinions or conclusions based on the expert opinion.

Journalists may not be aware of the nuances of every aspect of an environmental issue and even if they were, it is essential to get the opinion of an expert to back the claims made.

The journalist must also keep in mind that just because an expert is termed as such does not necessarily mean they are an expert in every field related to the environment. It is in the interest of everyone involved for the journalist to ensure that the expert they are obtaining the comment from is an expert in that field.

For example, when reporting a story on mangrove conservation, the comment should be from an expert in mangroves. It is impractical and purposeless to obtain a comment from an expert on whales about mangroves.

This is also important because the main purpose of reporting on the environment is to find a solution. The story needs to highlight the issue at hand and suggest a solution. Recently, the understanding that expertise and practical solutions to the challenges faced may exist not only with experts but also with indigenous/ traditional communities and within society has been recognised and acknowledged.

4. Language

In any language used – be it Sinhala, Tamil or English – the manner in which a story is phrased is important. A journalist must understand how the story needs to be set up

and make sure it is communicated clearly. The first critical reader of your copy is you. If you do not understand it, then do not write it.

Further, the importance of language is stressed because if a story is too opinionated, it can cause further harm. The journalist must be able to distinguish between fact and opinion to avoid confusion.

5. The importance of science

When it comes to environmental journalism, some journalists get lost in the scientific jargon and terminology whereas sometimes they decide to opt out of it completely. The importance of science cannot be overemphasised, because it is science that gives weight and validity to the story.

A story will only be complete if the specifics are reported with the proper research done. Here, expert opinion is only one part, the scientific process behind an environmental issue needs to be explained in a manner that can be grasped by the public.

In the simplest of terms, science is important because the audience needs to understand the process of the natural world in order to understand the significance of the story reported.

6. The importance of the legal aspect

Like science, the legal aspects of environmental issues are significant. When developing policies/laws it is pivotal to provide a space for public comments as it presents an important window for journalists to create awareness on a relevant topic at a time when input can be provided.

For example, laws and gazettes especially become relevant when reporting on development projects that take place in protected areas and conservation that impacts the endemic flora and fauna. Awareness of the legal aspect of an environmental issue will also allow a journalist to convey environmental issues in which legal action is needed as part of a solution or mitigation.

7. The importance of the political aspect

Another notable challenge in environmental reporting, especially in the Sri Lankan context, is how often certain environmental problems are politicised. Hence, an environmental journalist must also pay close attention to the political aspect of a particular report or investigation, keeping in mind that they must always display impartiality.

8. The importance of quantitative data and statistics

Some ways through which quantitative data and statistics add more value to environmental reporting:

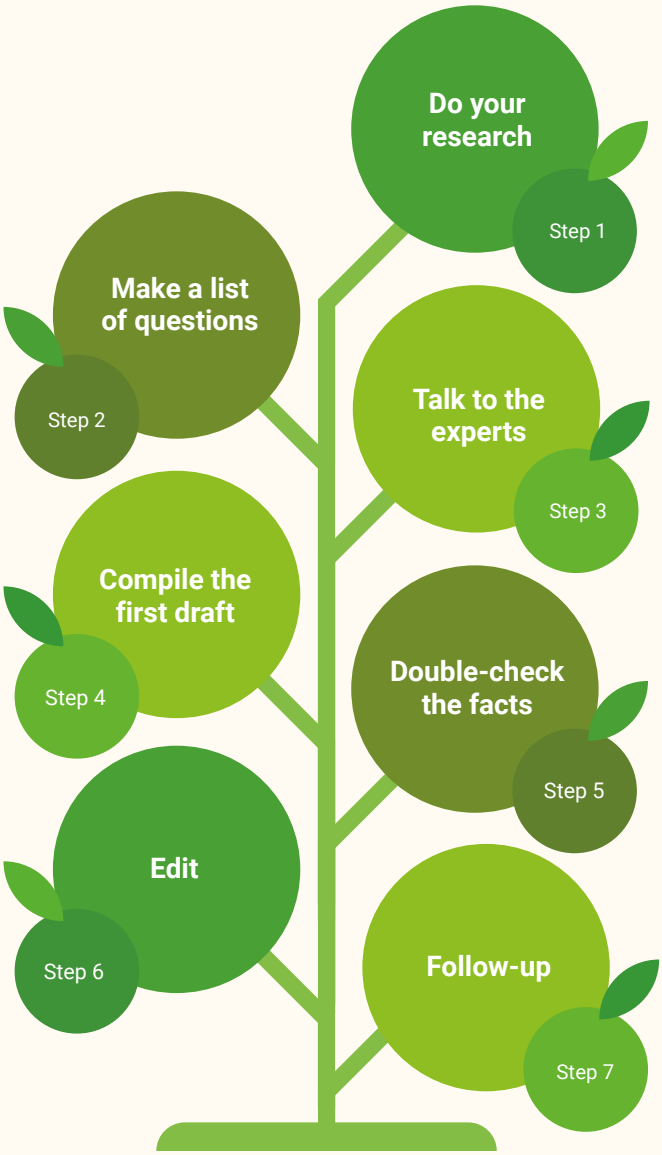
- Provide visualisation of information conveyed by the report through infographics and charts
- Provide validity and verification to the issues discussed
- Provide the opportunity for further analysis
- Provide the opportunity to identify trends and developments more easily

Step-by-step guide for environmental reporting

While environmental journalists are few and far in between at present in comparison to the past, environmental journalism has become a primary channel for environmental activists to raise awareness on environmental issues, conservation, and sustainability.

When written correctly and accurately, an article on the environment can raise awareness, be insightful and make an impact.

The steps below detail the process required to produce a good piece of writing once the story is pitched and how a comprehensive review ensures that all the boxes are ticked once a story is pitched.



Step 1
Do your research

When investigating an environmental incident, a starting point is referring to books or sources on the internet to learn more about the subject.

Become knowledgeable enough to know which questions to ask.

Every topic will have multiple sources and angles from which information can be sourced. Although this varies depending on the topic covered in the article, some of the most popular sources are:

- Government Institutes
- Environmentalists and Environmental Activist Groups
- Academics/experts on certain fields and themes (marine biology, environmental law, ornithology, ecology, air pollution, etc.)
- Literature collections (such as libraries)
- Scientific research reports
- Policy briefs and project reports from reputable civil society organisations, NGOs, UN entities, and other sources

Step 2
Make a list of questions

If done right, good research will generate questions that require answers. List all of them down because some of these questions will provide the angle to the story.

A comprehensive piece of writing must have the answers to questions that will come to the mind of the reader. Take your list of questions and highlight the most important ones that will require expert opinion.

Step 3
Talk to the experts

The importance of expert opinion cannot be overstated. Explore the experts relevant to the story and speak to them. Special attention needs to be paid to their responses.

The key to a good article is in finding the right expert who is relevant to the story. This could be done by going through the publications done by the experts to get an idea about their area of expertise. Previous interviews conducted by experts as well as their official websites will also provide clues on the relevance of their expertise to the story.

The story might drastically change according to expert opinion. Speak to more than one person to get a balanced story, but also beware of differences of opinion between experts. Some experts might have an underlying agenda that detracts from the story. As a journalist, your job is to inform, not to further another's agenda.

Step 4
Compile the first draft

A first draft compiles all the answers to key questions, sifts through the jargon, and backs up key information or arguments with expert opinion. This will no doubt exceed the word count and other guidelines issued by the publication.

The first draft or the rough copy can help organise the writer's thoughts into a coherent story. It can then be crafted adding or omitting details to produce a second or later version of the story.

Step 5
Double-check the facts

Read through the draft, double-check the facts and their sources, and if required, verify their quotes. Double - check everything from quotes, to acronyms, to scientific words to key numbers and anything else that adds to the authenticity of the article.

Step 6
Edit

A journalist must be their harshest critic. Read/ imagine the story from the point of view of the audience and edit it vigorously.

Step 7
Follow-up

Environmental stories very rarely end with just one report. It is up to the journalist to follow up on the story, find out if any action has been taken, report on any developments, and ensure that a solution is formed.

Keep in touch with the experts and activists, follow up with them and leads for additional stories may be harvested from these conversations.

THINGS TO WATCH OUT FOR

Like with any form of journalism, environmental journalism too can be complex. There are certain things to be cautious about while preparing a report.

1. **Incorrect terminology**
   Using incorrect terminology can lead the audience astray. If you are uncertain of the most suitable term to use, consult an expert. Avoid coining new terms to explain existing issues.

2. **Unqualified experts/ Unverified sources**
   While there are certain individuals who are experts in multiple fields, most specialise in a single field related to the environment. They usually have subject matter expertise in a narrow, specialised area and should not be cited as experts for topics beyond that area. Similarly, there are many sources available on the internet on environmental issues. Avoid quoting individuals or citing unverified sources just to lend credibility to your report. Ensure that arguments within an article – whether by an expert or a citation – convey accurate and verified information from reliable, trusted sources.

3. **Agenda-based opinions**
   Journalists may experience a situation where an expert will provide their opinion as fact, or a source will provide a comment with an underlying agenda. Beware of these scenarios bearing in mind that a journalist's duty is to inform the masses, not to further someone else's agenda.

Keywords

Compiled below is a list of some of the most important terms and abbreviations used in reporting environmental issues and climate change. Knowing the definition of these terms could help you understand certain issues and concepts that are often used by environmental experts.

Term	Abbrev.	Definition
Action for Climate Empowerment	ACE	Empowerment of different stakeholders (including civil society and youth) to engage in climate action— through education, training, awareness creation, access to information, public participation, and international cooperation
Adaptive Management	AM	A comprehensive scientific approach to environmental management by applying an efficient and effective learn-by-doing process to address the risks and uncertainties inherent within unpredictable systems like natural ecosystems
Biodiversity (also called Biological Diversity)	-	The range of species, subspecies or communities in a specific habitat such as a rainforest
Biosphere (also called ecosphere)	-	The part of the Earth and its atmosphere where living organisms exist, including parts of the lithosphere, the hydrosphere and the atmosphere
Census	-	A survey of a specific population to assess numbers and other features
Climate and disaster risk finance and insurance	CDRFI	Pre-arranged financial instruments and mechanisms that enhance financial resilience and/or provide financial resources to react to disasters and unexpected shocks, including climate-related and non-climate-related ones
Climate change	-	Long-term shifts in temperatures and weather patterns, which are predominantly caused by human activity and the overall global temperature rise caused by greenhouse gas emissions and the burning of fossil fuels. Key sectors that contribute to this process include energy, industry, transport, buildings, agriculture, and land use

Climate change adaptation	CCA	Adjustments in natural or human systems to respond to actual or expected climatic changes and their effects to reduce negative impacts or exploit positive opportunities
Climate change mitigation	-	Human intervention to reduce the sources of greenhouse gas emissions or enhance sinks that take greenhouse gases out of the atmosphere
Climate risk	-	The interaction of a hazard (such as a flood, drought, or storm), exposure (of people, assets, or infrastructure), and vulnerability. Risks can be addressed through climate risk management
Climate risk management	CRM	Refers to a range of different elements, including risk awareness and risk assessments, risk prevention, risk reduction, risk transfer, and risk retention
Community	-	A group of different organisms which live together in an area
Conference of the Parties	COP	The supreme body of the UNFCCC and currently meets once a year to review progress in climate change mitigation, adaptation, and other aspects of climate action. The annual meetings of the COP are often referred to as COP as well
Conservation	-	The process of protecting the environment from undesirable change and the maintenance of environmental quality and resources by the use of ecological knowledge and principles
Density	-	The number of individuals (organisms, species) in a specific area
Ecosystem	-	A complex of plant, animal and microorganism communities and their interactions with the environment in which they live
Environment	-	The surroundings of any organism, including the physical world and other organisms

Global warming	-	The long-term heating of Earth's surface, which has been observed since the pre-industrial period (between 1850 and 1900) due to human activities. It is primarily caused by the burning of fossil fuels, which increases heat-trapping greenhouse gases in the Earth's atmosphere and leads to long-term climatic changes and shifts
Greenhouse gas emissions	GHGs	The atmospheric gases responsible for causing global warming and climate change, including the major GHGs carbon dioxide (CO2), methane (CH4), and nitrous oxide (N20) as well as the less prevalent GHGs hydrofluorocarbons (HFCs), perfluorocarbons (PFCs), and sulphur hexafluoride (SF6).
Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change	IPCC	The foremost scientific body on climate change in the world which surveys the state of global scientific and technical research on this thematic area and publishes regular assessment reports that are developed and reviewed by hundreds of scientists
Kyoto Protocol	-	One of two international agreements under the UNFCCC. The Kyoto Protocol, among other things, sets binding targets for the reduction of GHG emissions by industrialised countries
Net zero	-	The balancing of human-induced GHG emissions with human-created GHG removals over a specified period, either through natural sinks or technological carbon removal measures, which are currently not available at scale
Paris Agreement	PA	One of two international agreements under the UNFCCC. The central goal of the Paris Agreement is to limit global warming to well below 2 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels, preferably to 1.5 degrees Celsius
Plant protection	-	The activity of protecting plants from disease by biocontrol, cultivation practices and especially by the application of pesticides

Population	-	A number of individuals of the same species living and breeding in a specific area
Preservation	-	The process of protecting the environment and its elements from undue damage or decay
Protection	-	The process of safeguarding a species that has been legally identified as in danger of extinction, or an area of sea or land that has special value for the maintenance of biological diversity and natural resources
Regeneration	-	The process of vegetation growing back on land which has been cleared or burn
Species	-	A group of organisms that can interbreed. A species is a division of a genus
United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change	UNFCCC	An international treaty established at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) ("Rio Earth Summit") in 1992 and entered into force on 21 March 1994 to prevent "dangerous" human interference with the climate system
Sustainable Development		Development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs

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