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Could You Be a Citizen Scientist? - Earth911.com

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Mystery lovers were thrilled by a recent real-life whodunnit in which citizen scientists tracked down criminals responsible for manufacturing banned chemicals. Citizen scientists rarely catch criminals, but they often make meaningful contributions to professional scientific research. And anyone can become a citizen scientist.

A CFC Mystery

One of the biggest environmental success stories of the '80s was the 1987 Montreal Protocol, which banned CFCs, the chemicals responsible for ozone depletion. Then, after years of improvement, the U.S. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) in Colorado discovered increasing CFC levels that pointed to new production somewhere in East Asia. If the new pollution continued, it could delay repair of the ozone layer for a decade or longer.

The New York Times and the nonprofit Environmental Investigation Agency (EIA) took the case and discovered at least eight unregistered factories in China using the chemical CFC-11 in blown foam insulation. The international attention from these investigations will likely spur a crack-down on illegal factories in China.

Citizen Science

As technology becomes more ubiquitous and easier to buy and use, everyone can consider participating in pollution enforcement.

EIA's investigation, which began with an analysis of NOAA data, is an example of citizen science. While few individuals have the resources to conduct an international criminal investigation, science is something that everyone can do. The four components of citizen science are:

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