

Forests are drivers of sustainability

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Opinion

Forests are vital indicators of environmental health and socioeconomic well-being of a nation. The recently released India State of Forest Report 2023 puts the forest cover of India at 21.76 per cent.

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Mangrove cover in Bhitarkanika sanctuary [Photo : SNS]

Forests are vital indicators of environmental health and socioeconomic well-being of a nation. The recently released India State of Forest Report 2023 puts the forest cover of India at 21.76 per cent. This figure was 21.71 per cent in 2021. According to the National Forest Policy 1988, the national forest cover goal should be to have one-third of the total land area under forest or tree cover.

The current national tree cover, according to the India State of Forest Report 2023, is 3.41 per cent which puts the forest and tree cover of India at only 25.17 per cent. Forest conservation and afforestation activities in India must pick up pace to reach the one-third forest cover goal; doing so will help achieve many other goals including the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The Global Forest Goals report 2021 of the United Nations estimates that 1.6 billion people, or one-fourth of the global population, rely on forests for meeting their daily needs, livelihoods and income (UN SDG 1&2). It further highlights that for centuries, forests have provided socio economic safety nets for people and communities especially in times of crisis such as the hardships brought upon by the Covid-19 pandemic. Three-fourths of emerging infectious diseases are zoonotic and usually occur when natural landscapes like forests are cleared.

Maintaining healthy forests is therefore critical for good health and well-being (UN SDG 3). Moreover, being in or near forests and trees boosts the immune system, lowers blood pressure, reduces stress and prevents diseases caused by stress. Forest ecosystems are the largest terrestrial carbon sink and help absorb nearly 2 billion tonnes of carbon dioxide each year. Protecting existing forests and increasing forest cover is therefore the most significant nature-based solution for preventing climate change (UN SDG 13). Forests help bring rain and recharge the surface and ground water thereby contributing to UN SDG 6 (clean water & sanitation).

Forests are home to approximately 80 per cent of all terrestrial species and play a key role in supporting and protecting all life on land (UN SDG 15). According to the State of the World's Forests report 2024 of the Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO), 75 per cent of the world's population uses non-timber forest products (NTFP). In India, NTFPs support the livelihoods of around 275 million people, with local communities deriving up to 40 per cent of their income from it. This dependence will only increase in coming years. Forests are drivers of sustainability and are also facing tremendous pressure due to many challenges. The FAO 2024 report alerts that climate change is making forests more vulnerable to wildfire and pest attacks.

Increasing human population is expanding villages, agriculture and industries into forested areas resulting in deforestation and reduction in forest cover. This is giving rise to other challenges like increasing human-wildlife conflicts. As per official figures, 606 human lives were lost due to elephants in India in 2023-24 and 82 human lives were lost due to tiger attacks in 2023. Protecting forest cover and maintaining a harmonious relationship with forests will reduce human-wildlife conflicts and prevent loss of human lives. India has been carrying out regular assessment and reporting of its forest resources since 1987 which is commendable. Given the importance of forests, it is equally important to delve deeper and understand the significance of these findings for environmental protection and sustainable growth of the country. The impact of forest cover on ecosystem services must be analysed at regional levels. This will help align forest conservation efforts with broader environmental goals and ensure better community and local government participation in protecting and enhancing forest cover.

For example, air pollution is an increasing problem in North-western India. A preliminary analysis of the India State of Forest Report 2023 reveals that almost all states in this region have poor forest cover. Haryana (3.65 per cent), Punjab (3.67 per cent), Rajasthan (4.84 per cent) and Uttar Pradesh (6.24 per cent) have the lowest forest cover among all states in India, far less than the 33 per cent goal. Forest cover in Delhi is only marginally better at 13.17 per cent. Less forest cover corresponds to less filtering of air pollutants in this region. The impact of reduced forest cover on air quality in North-western India requires thorough study, especially since we have failed to effectively control this health hazard.

According to the Dynamic Ground Water Resource of India 2024 report of the Central Ground Water Board, ground water in the same North-western part of the country is most over-exploited. More ground water is being withdrawn in this region than can be naturally recharged. Forests help recharge ground water; thus, enhancing forest cover on war footing in North-western states can help solve these environmental crises. Forests have great healing and rejuvenating properties which makes them an asset for any nation. We are living in an era of rapid environmental change and the path to sustainability begins with how seriously we monitor, assess, value and protect our forests today.

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- [Forests](#)
- [India](#)
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