



Action Plan for India's Forest Management

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(Mains GS 3 : Conservation, Environmental Pollution and Degradation, Environmental Impact Assessment.)

Context:

- The **Ministry of Environment, Forests and Climate Change (MoEFCC)** recently released the India State of Forest Report in which it reported that the growth of India's forest cover has slowed to an eight-year low in 2021, with just 0.22 per cent increase over 2019.
- By the year 2030, 45-64% of India's forests are projected to be impacted by climate change and rising temperatures.

Commitment of India:

- India, under the **United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD)** goals, has committed to restore 5 million hectares of degraded and deforested land between 2021 and 2030.
- Alongside, India's Intended Nationally Determined Contribution (INDC) for climate change aims to sequester 2.5 to 3 billion tonnes of carbon dioxide equivalent by 2030 through enhanced tree cover.
- However, 29.7% or 97.85 million hectares of India's land is considered degraded and meeting the climate pledge would require India to extend tree cover by 12% over the next decade.

Meaningful management:

- India can not afford any further deterioration of its forest cover as more than a fifth of the population depend on forest for livelihood and the rich ecological, economic and development value it produces.
- Thus to stop any further deterioration of its forest cover India needs to ensure a meaningful management of the loss of forest cover, both ecologically and socially.

Redefine 'forests:

- Relying on satellite imagery and remote sensing data, Forest Survey of India defines forests as, "all patches of land, with a tree canopy density of more than 10% and more than one hectare in area, irrespective of land use, ownership and species of trees".
- Satellite imagery is incapable of detecting differences between plantation and forest; therefore, any tree cover whether bamboo, coffee, tree orchards, or urban parks are currently recognised as 'forests.'
- As opposed to plantations, native forests are complex natural ecosystems hosting 30-40 different species of trees, that are products of millions of years of evolution, shaped by the biophysical features of specific regions and they act as the most potent carbon sinks.
- Therefore, a mere tree canopy cannot be considered as a forest so a more thoughtful definition will help India design and plan effective interventions to protect, restore and conserve a 'forest'.

Tackle diversion:

- To protect forests, the rapid diversion of forestland for non-forest purposes must be discouraged.
- India's Compensatory Afforestation Programme relies on the notion that forests are replaceable and could be easily recreated at another land.
- Therefore, clearances are granted to projects that require the use of forest areas for non-forest purposes, by collecting a monetary value as environment compensation, that are allotted to the states to undertake 'compensatory afforestation' on an earmarked non-forest land.
- The National Board for Wildlife (NBWL) has approved diversion of around 1,792 hectares of protective land or eco-sensitive zones for 48 projects in 2020 for linear projects that are land-disturbing in nature such as road, railways etc.

Substantial decline:

- To compensate for the loss of 'forests', India's afforestation programme focuses on large-scale monoculture, single variety tree plantations of non-indigenous, commercial species such as eucalyptus and teak, on a non-forest land.

- Unlike forests, monoculture plantations lack the biodiversity or ecological value, diversity or quality of species, or long survival rates of trees.
- These plantations have very little capacity to hold carbon and emit carbon when the wood is burnt; thus, despite efforts, the programme has been largely ineffective in carrying out any substantial ecological greening in India.
- According to ISFR 2021, the moderately dense forests or natural forests have declined by 1,582 sq km and the decline, in conjunction with an increase of 2,621 sq km in open forest areas highlights a significant degradation of forests to less dense open forests.

Create policy framework:

- India should create a policy framework on forest management aimed at curtailing deforestation, while improving the ecology and biodiversity of a landscape that would ensure food security, water availability and climate adaptation for communities.
- Employing a scientific evidence based methodology with a participatory approach will help the government determine the right type of tree based interventions most suitable to certain land use.
- Adopting the Restoration Opportunities Assessment Methodology (ROAM) framework at scale could help in rigorous analysis of spatial, legal and socio-economic data to plan best interventions for forest restoration.

Require the support:

- Any effort to regenerate or afforest lands will require the support of local communities who have the capacity to undertake adaptive management and maintain close oversight.
- For interventions to create value, the long-standing knowledge systems and community efforts in protection of forest resources must be recognised by formally establishing their authority in forest stewardship.
- Farmer-managed natural regeneration (FMNR) systems where local communities protect and manage the growth of trees that regenerate naturally have proven to deliver several economic and ecosystem benefits.
- In India, the National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development's (NABARD's) 'Wadi' model and the Foundation for Ecological Security's re-greening of village commons project are effective models of tree-based interventions that have proved to deliver great value and range of benefits to communities.

Conclusion:

Given the critical state of India's forest, it is imperative to move beyond compensatory afforestation and adopt meaningful strategies for creating serious impact on the ground.

