

'Can comfortably achieve target of 30x30 by 2030'

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India is confident of protecting at least 30% of biodiversity rich land and water areas by 2030 (30x30) under the global biodiversity framework agreed upon at the UN biodiversity summit earlier this month. But India will not cut farm-related subsidies to redirect the savings for biodiversity conservation, as a vast part of the rural population is dependent on agriculture and allied sectors, including seeds and fertilizers. With pressures to divert native forests and biodiversity rich areas rising to meet India's development and infrastructure needs, Union environment minister Bhupender Yadav said in an interview that India can manage a balancing act. Edited excerpts:

Are you satisfied with the outcome at the biodiversity summit and why?

The global biodiversity framework responds to assessments that provide ample evidence that despite ongoing efforts, biodiversity is deteriorating at rates unprecedented in human history. That is why the 2022 United Nations Biodiversity Conference paved the way for future action, with nearly 200 countries adopting a historic deal to preserve nature and reverse damage to ecosystems after four years of fraught negotiations. India's strong intervention that ecosystem based approaches should be given their due place in all mitigation processes made a significant contribution to the landmark framework.

The framework aims to halt the loss of ecologically important areas by 2030. The target of conserving 30% of land and water area by 2030 was contentious during the negotiations. The text of the framework, however, made it clear that the target is global, and not specific to any country. This is something India had negotiated hard for since we have always rooted for an approach of common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities.

What were India's achievements at the summit?

India negotiated strongly and held discussions with the presidency and the secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity before the final global biodiversity framework was put up for adoption. As a

result, the suggestions from India to keep all the goals and targets globally were accepted, along with other propositions. India's pitch for Lifestyle for Environment (LiFE), and common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities found an echo in the framework. India also made a significant contribution in developing consensus on several issues relevant to the developing South.

We had pushed hard for Digital Sequence Information (DSI) and it was finally adopted as part of the historic deal. The move will ensure a steady flow of funds to countries such as India from users such as biotechnology companies, which access our biodiversity and related genetic information. With DSI becoming a reality, developing countries rich in biodiversity will benefit from funds to conserve their biodiversity. India with one of the world's richest pool of biodiversity, given its varied climatic and geographical diversity, stands to gain from it. It will also help indigenous communities who conserve biodiversity and associate traditional knowledge in a big way.

How will India implement the 30x30 target?

India is already a member of the High Ambition Coalition (HAC), a group of 113 countries that aim to bring 30% of the geographical area under conservation by 2030. With its protective area network that includes reserved forests, national parks, wildlife sanctuaries, mangroves, Ramsar sites, and eco-sensitive zones, India has already achieved close to 27% of the area under conservation. We are now focusing on more areas to be brought under conservation through biodiversity heritage sites and other effective conservation measures. India can comfortably achieve the target of 30x30 by 2030.

What is your view on eliminating subsidies harmful to nature and reducing dependence on pesticides and chemical inputs?

For developing nations, agriculture is a paramount economic driver for rural communities, and the critical support provided to these sectors cannot be redirected. A vast part of our rural population is dependent on agriculture and allied sectors and Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government provides a variety of subsidies, including seed, fertilizer, irrigation, power, export, credit, agriculture equipment, agriculture infrastructure for supporting the livelihoods of farmers mainly, small and marginal.

India does not agree to reducing the agriculture related subsidy and redirecting the savings for biodiversity conservation, as there are many other national priorities. We say this because when food security is of utmost importance for developing countries, prescribing numerical targets in pesticide reductions is unnecessary and must be left to countries to decide, based on national circumstances, priorities and capabilities.

But again, being responsible global partners, India is doing its bit for making the leap to natural farming. The Indian government has distributed over 23 crore soil health cards to farmers. Between 2015 and 2019, the soil health cards led to a 8-10% decline in the use of chemical fertilisers and raised productivity by 5-6%. The central government is supporting moves for agriculture to move away from chemicals, and the results are encouraging.

Are you satisfied with the global biodiversity framework's provisions on finance?

One of the most contentious issues in the negotiations was the finance package to support conservation efforts globally, and in developing countries particularly. The framework commits to progressively increase the level of financial resources from all sources by 2030, mobilising at least \$200 billion per year. This commitment represents almost a doubling from a 2020 baseline. A notable achievement is also the commitment to \$20 billion in international finance flows to developing countries by 2025 and \$30 billion by 2030. While these commitments as part of the framework are welcome, the track record of developed countries in ensuring the funds are released has been dubious. I am, however, hopeful that given the scale of the problem that is facing us, which has put our very existence in danger, the developed countries will rise to the occasion.

India, however, has been working on generating and mobilising its own resources to tackle the challenge. We had a Green Budget in 2021-22 and the government came up with green bonds. I am hopeful for a greener future with these efforts being undertaken.

How will India bring back critically endangered species from the brink of extinction?

Under Prime Minister Modi, India is fulfilling its commitment to not just preserve but also restore our ecological balance. Protecting endangered species, whether flora or fauna, requires protecting their habitats and ensuring a way to sustain life around it. India has increased the number of Ramsar sites at an unprecedented pace. Our tally now stands at 75. Our forest cover has been increasing. India has 12 beaches identified as Blue Beaches. All this goes into protecting endangered species. We have dedicated programmes to conserve lions, tigers, elephants and now even cheetahs. The reintroduction of the cheetah was one of the biggest initiatives that show the government's commitment to restore wildlife.

A key aspect of the government's conservation efforts is the involvement of indigenous communities. We believe by extending the required support to these communities, we can serve wildlife better. The Wildlife (Protection) Amendment Bill, 2022, is aimed at protecting the interests of the local communities. It also rationalises schedules that list out species under the Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972. We are working at multiple levels to protect species that face a risk of extinction.

How will you balance India's developmental pressures that leads to diversion of forested and biodiversity rich areas for infrastructure projects with our commitment to conserving biodiversity?

Prime Minister Modi has said on several occasions that development and conservation are not an either-or thing. The two can exist in tandem. Rather, both stand to gain from each other. Protecting forest land is critical; it is equally important to safeguard the rights of the people who have been residing there for ages. It is also important for India to accelerate its pace of development to be able to pull people out of poverty and ensure for them a dignified life.

We are working on sustainable models. The biodiversity summit recognised every country's right to development. We are culturally nature loving people. Despite being 17% of the world's population, we have contributed only 4% to the historical cumulative emissions. We do not take from nature out of greed, but only as much as is our need.

Do you see any common grounds between the climate negotiations and biodiversity negotiations?

They are interrelated and mutually co-dependent. One can't exist without the other. In fact, I see a common ground between climate negotiations, biodiversity negotiations and negotiations to halt land degradation.

Temperature change has a bearing on all life forms, be it plants, or animals or humans. Similarly, when forests are lost, everyone suffers. And similarly, when we lose land to desertification and degradation due to say addition of more chemicals or loss of tress, it again has a bearing on everyone. We should see the holistic picture and not one in isolation of the other.

Do you think the implementation of Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework by 2030 will be successful? How will progress be monitored?

Clear indicators to measure progress have been set to avoid the failure as seen in the Aichi Targets. The countries will monitor and report every five years or less on a large set of indicators related to progress. The CBD will combine national information submitted by late February 2026 and late June 2029 into global trend and progress reports.

This agreement means people world over can hope for real progress to halt biodiversity loss and protect and restore our land and oceans in a way that safeguards our planet and respects the rights of indigenous people. I am hopeful for a better future because there is public pressure on governments across the world to deliver on climate commitments. With younger people around the world raising a pitch for a sustainable environment, I have reason to believe, we will see action.

What have been India's achievements on climate negotiations at COP27?

From India's standpoint, the outcomes of COP27 have been significant as they accommodate concerns, views and suggestions proposed by us individually and as the collective voice of the developing nations. The most significant was the inclusion of Sustainable Lifestyle in the Sharm El-Sheikh Implementation Plan. It is PM Modi who has made the pitch for an Environmentally-Friendly Lifestyle, through his mantra of Mission LiFE and the world moved in that direction by including Sustainable Lifestyle and

Sustainable Patterns of Consumption and Production for efforts to address climate change, in the Implementation Plan.

Apart from this, significant breakthroughs were achieved on key issues, the primary being the agreement on Loss and Damage funding, adaptation and encouraging mitigation work programmes that tackle emission reduction headfirst and catalyse impactful implementation.

The establishment of a new Funding Arrangement for assisting developing countries that are particularly vulnerable to the adverse effects of climate change, responding to loss and damage, including a focus on addressing loss and damage by providing and assisting in mobilizing new and additional resources, and that these new arrangements complement and include sources, funds, processes, initiatives within and outside the Convention and the Paris Agreement, is significant. In another important move, COP27 established a four-year work program on climate action in agriculture and food security.

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