



Conserving Forests for a Sustainable Future

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Forests in India cover about 24.62.62% of the country's land area (including tree cover) and are some of the most biodiverse forests in the world. They provide a range of important ecosystem services, such as protecting against soil erosion, regulating the water cycle, and serving as a home for a wide variety of plant and animal species.

But forests in India are also under threat from a range of activities, including illegal logging, mining, and land conversion for agriculture and urban development.

The Indian government has implemented a number of measures to protect and conserve forests, including the creation of protected areas and the promotion of sustainable forest management practices.

However, more needs to be done to ensure the long-term survival of these important ecosystems.

What is the Significance of Forests for India?

- Ecosystem Services: Forests in India provide a range of important ecosystem services, such as water regulation, soil conservation, and carbon sequestration.
 - For example, forests in the Western Ghats help to regulate the water cycle of southern states and protect against soil erosion.
- Hub of Biodiversity: India is home to a wide variety of plant and animal species, many of which are found only in the country's forests.
 - For example, the Sundarbans mangrove forests in the Bay of Bengal are home to the Royal Bengal tiger.
- Economic Value: Forests in India provide a range of economic benefits, including timber, non-timber forest products, and tourism.
 - For example, the bamboo forests of the Northeast are a major source of livelihood for local communities, while the country's national parks and wildlife sanctuaries attract millions of tourists each year.
- Cultural value: Forests in India also have significant cultural and spiritual value for many communities, who depend on them for their livelihoods and cultural practices.
 - For example, Gond tribes of Madhya Pradesh.

What are the Issues Associated with Forests in India?

- Deforestation and Land Degradation: Forests in India are under threat from a range of activities, including illegal logging, mining, and land conversion for agriculture and urban development.
 - This has led to deforestation and land degradation, which in turn has negative impacts on the environment and on the communities that depend on forests for their livelihoods.
- Biodiversity Loss: Deforestation and other activities that damage forests also lead to a loss of biodiversity, as plant and animal species are unable to survive in their natural habitat.
 - This can have knock-on effects on the ecosystem as a whole, as well as on the cultural practices of the communities that depend on these species.
- Climate Change: Forest disturbances caused by climate change, including insect outbreaks, invasive species due to climate led migration, wildfires, and storms, reduce forest productivity and change species distribution.
 - By 2030, 45-64% of forests in India will experience the effects of climate change and rising temperatures.

- **Shrinking Forest Cover:** According to the National Forest Policy of India, the ideal percentage of total geographical area under forest should be at least 33% to maintain ecological stability.
 - However, it currently covers just 24.62.62 % of the country's land and is shrinking rapidly.
- **Resource Access Conflict:** There is often conflict between the interests of local communities and those of commercial interests, such as pharmaceutical industries **or timber industries**. This can lead to **social tensions and even violence**, as different groups struggle to access and use the resources of the forests.

What Should be the Way Forward?

- **Community Managed Forests:** Developing a network of **community-managed forests**, where local communities are given **the responsibility for protecting and managing their local forests**.
 - This can help to empower local people and give them a **stake in the conservation of their forests**.
 - By engaging directly with communities, the **informal forest economy can be transformed into business transactions** that are **fair and transparent** and incentivise sustainable protection, management, and restoration of India's forests.
- **Selective Logging and Reforestation:** Promoting sustainable forestry practices, such as **selective logging and reforestation**, to ensure that **forests are managed in a way that preserves their ecological value**.
- **Leveraging Technology for Conservation:** Technology can be utilized such as **remote sensing and GIS**, to monitor and track **forest cover, forest fire** and **identify areas in need of protection**.
 - Also, **Potential resource mapping can be done in unexplored forest areas**, and they can be brought under scientific management and sustainable resource extraction maintaining density and forest health
- **Dedicated Forest Corridors:** For safe intrastate and interstate passage of wild animals and protecting their habitat from any external influence, **Dedicated Forest Corridors** can be maintained giving a message of peaceful-co existence.
- **Recognising Forest Based Products:** Recognising the **value of forest based products** and if communities protect forests because they get better prices for **Sal seeds, Mahua flowers, or Tendu leaves**, they will protect them from fires as well as any other threats that come along. **Carbon sequestration** will be a side benefit.

Source:<https://www.drishtiiias.com/daily-updates/daily-news-editorials/conserving-forests-for-a-sustainable-future>