

Forest report's conclusion of increase in cover should not lead to complacency. Loss of natural forests is worrying

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For the better part of the past 35 years, the Forest Survey of India's State of Forest Reports (ISFR) have been showing a steady increase in the country's forest cover. The 17th edition of the biennial report released last week showed that India's forests have increased by more than 1,500 sq km between 2019 and 2021 and 17 states have a forest cover of more than 33 per cent. A closer reading of the report, however, shows areas of serious concern. The country has lost more than 1,600 sq km of natural forests in this period. The loss has been compensated by an improvement in the health of some of the protected areas and reserve forests. But a large part of the increase is due to more areas coming under plantations, which experts rightly argue are no substitute for natural forests when it comes to providing critical ecological services.

In 2017, the Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO) slotted all plantations, other than oil palm trees, in its definition of forests. The classification attracted much criticism and more than 200 scientific bodies, conservation agencies and NGOs shot off an open letter urging the FAO to "change how it defines forests". Plantations are typically composed of even-aged trees of the same species. Such monocultures do have economic value and limited utility as carbon sinks. But they cannot be compared to natural forests in harbouring biodiversity or aiding pollination or as sources of water bodies. The loss of more than 1,000 sq km of natural forests in the Northeast, is, therefore, worrying. The ISFR attributes this loss to natural calamities as well as anthropogenic activities such as shifting agriculture, developmental activities, and the felling of trees. This could have a bearing on the health of aquifers in the region, where water scarcity is already a serious problem. The loss in the forest cover of some of the tiger reserves, including the Sunderbans, should also be a cause for concern.

The FAO has clarified that its definition of forests is an aid to data gathering and should not be seen as a conservation yardstick or as an indicator of ecosystem health. This caveat has not been totally lost on the authors of the latest ISFR. Policymakers should do well to read the report's fine print and not be lulled into complacency by the report's general conclusion of an increase in the country's net forest area.

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