

How Sikkim is giving citizens a say in forest conservation

The state government has launched projects to involve people in forest management and formulating policies for a sustainable ecosystem

Romita Datta

Kolkata,UPDATED: Jan 19, 2023



The Sikkim government has formed various people-centric committees, such as the joint forestry management committee and biodiversity management committee; (Photo representational)

The Sikkim government has taken a unique initiative of involving citizens in the conservation of natural resources, especially forests. After all, who can understand the forests better than people who are its direct beneficiaries? A slew of projects has been launched, which seek the participation of locals in conservation of the forest cover. In Sikkim, forest cover constitutes 47 per cent of the geographical area. Forest land, however, covers 83 per cent.

The government has formed various people-centric committees, such as the joint forestry management committee and biodiversity management committee, to ensure people's participation at the grassroots level. Besides, it wants people to suggest policies and come up with proposals for a sustainable ecosystem.

Explaining the methodology, state additional chief secretary (forest & environment) M.L. Srivastava said it were the locals who urged the government to weed out dhupi plantation. Dhupi is a fast-growing species and responsible for quick forest growth. But the timber was bad and of no use to locals. It was also harmful for bushes and undergrowth and biodiversity. Had such a proposal not come from the people, the state would have unknowingly continued destroying its biodiversity, said Srivastava.

The Sikkim government has tied up with the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) and UNDP for linking up forest development with livelihood. The JICA- Sikkim government project provides for loans of Rs 3 lakh to committees for developing the entire ecosystem, with entry-point activities like constructing small village roads, women's toilets, homestays and developing trekking trails.

UNDP, the Indian government and Sikkim government are collaborating on the SECURE Himalaya project, which has opened up secured livelihood opportunities in the state. Thousands of young people are being trained as frontline forest staff and for adventure and nature tourism. "The government is practically doing the handholding to augment incomes of locals. They are into diverse but highly remunerative crop plantations like ginger, turmeric and yarsagumba (considered an aphrodisiac). "We are helping them streamline collection and market the products. Replacing firewood and chullahs with gas cylinders is another of our awareness programmes to reduce the need for firewood, and thereby the felling of trees," said Srivastava.

Forest fires are another major environmental hazard. Sikkim witnessed 54 forest fires last year, but these could be easily tackled since they had not spread to the canopy. The government has also been identifying the vulnerable fire points through satellite mapping and creating fire lines. Fire lines denote areas for chopping off trees 50-100 feet away from a row of thick vegetation so that the damage can be contained even if there's a forest fire.

Sikkim, with its seven wildlife sanctuaries and a national park, has around 31 per cent of its area under the Protected Area Network. Public-government interface is being seen as a move to win the confidence of people and generate employment. The state is going for assembly election in 2024 and these moves may even pay political dividend.

Source: [How Sikkim is giving citizens a say in forest conservation - India Today](#)