

Business Standard

India can comfortably achieve '30X30' biodiversity target: COP15 delegate

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India has about 27 per cent of its area under conservation and can comfortably reach the target of protecting 30 per cent of land and water by 2030, according to a senior delegate negotiating for the country at the COP15 biodiversity conference here in Canada.

J Justin Mohan, the

Secretary of the National Biodiversity Authority (NBA), noted that India is already a member of the High Ambition Coalition (HAC), a group of 113 countries that aims at bringing 30 per cent of the geographical area under conservation by 2030, also known as 30X30 target.

With our protective area network comprising reserved forests, national parks, wildlife sanctuaries, mangroves, Ramsar sites, eco-sensitive zones, and community reserves, India has already achieved about 27 per cent of the area under conservation, Mohan told PTI.

We are now focusing on more areas to be brought under conservation through biodiversity heritage sites and Other Effective Conservation Measures (OECMS). India can comfortably achieve the targets of 30X30 in 2030,

he explained.

OECMS are areas conserved by private and public entities. Large tracts of land are maintained with trees and biodiversity parks by private and public sector companies, educational institutions and army cantonments among others that could be brought under the conservation network as OECMs.

In India, there is a lot of potential for OECMs and this will help to achieve our targets of conserving 30 per cent of our geographical area, Mohan said.

Since these are not tagged to any biodiversity law, there are no hurdles for the establishments designating their areas as OECMs, he added.

Vinod Mathur, the former chairperson of India's National Biodiversity Authority (NBA), noted that India has developed a 14-category classification system to define OECMs.

These are clustered under three broad groups - terrestrial, water bodies, and marine areas, including agricultural landscapes, biodiversity parks, and industrial areas, Mathur said.

However, in order to bring these OECMs under conservation, there is a need to sensitise the local communities to conserve them in a more formal way so that their involvement is recognised as part of the national policy, he said.

Mohan noted that the Biological Diversity Act, which was enacted in 2002 by India to comply with its commitments to the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), has provisions to declare areas rich in biodiversity as Biodiversity Heritage Sites (BHS).

These are declared by the state governments and are managed by the biodiversity management Committees.

India now has 2,77,123 biodiversity management committees established in all the local bodies. There is a lot of scope for bringing more areas outside our forest ecosystems as biodiversity heritage sites, he said.

These areas may be rich in medicinal plants and birds, which if protected, will help in managing the ecosystem of the area, and enhance the potential for tourism which will, in turn, generate employment opportunities in the area. The Act has also provisions where the Access and Benefit Sharing funds can be used to manage these sites, Mohan added.

Till date, 36 BHS have been notified in India in 15 States and there is a huge potential for identifying additional areas with the help of the biodiversity management committees and state biodiversity boards.

Asked about the details for safeguarding the rights of indigenous communities while expanding areas of conservation, Mohan said the Biological Diversity Act of 2002 works in harmony with other forest laws that help in the livelihood of indigenous communities.

The Access and Benefit Sharing funds that will be accrued on account of the use of biological resources or associated traditional knowledge would be transferred to these communities for the cause of conservation and for undertaking any socio-economic development of the villages or tribal settlements, he added.

Vishaish Uppal, Director of Governance, Law and Policy at World Wildlife Fund (WWF) India, said for a country like India, it is also crucial that it recognises and supports efforts of tribal and local communities who have been conserving wetlands, forests, and coasts by establishing community-conserved areas and will help to contribute towards nature conservation.

This will help to ensure the sustainable use and management of their forest areas and also promote income generation through community-based tourism, she told PTI.

To counter the global biodiversity crisis, at the 2010 UN CBD COP10, almost 200 countries pledged to protect at least 17 per cent of their terrestrial environments and inland water, and 10 per cent of coastal and marine areas by 2020 (known as the Aichi Targets).

India says it has achieved the Aichi target of 17 per cent of terrestrial area-based conservation.

A recent study, published in the journal *Communications Biology*, estimated that almost all Asian countries will fail to meet the 2030 target in the GBF unless their rate of establishing protected areas increases by up to six times.

Uppal noted that India's efforts to conserve its forest areas need to be strengthened by ensuring that there is no further degradation - especially of its dense forests.

Uppal also cautioned that the 30x30 target is not enough alone to halt and reverse biodiversity loss by 2030 for a nature-positive world.

We also need to ensure there is the restoration of degraded areas, as well as sustainable and inclusive management of the rest of the 70 per cent of the planet, she said.

Souparna Lahiri, Climate Policy Advisor, Global Forest Coalition agreed, saying in order to achieve 30x30, India needs to halt deforestation and biodiversity loss first, which he said: is far-fetched as of now.

Secondly, to go beyond where India is now, they require not fortress model of conservation but the quality of protection, where you require equitable management and governance by the tribals and other traditional forest dwellers, going by the legal language that India recognises, Lahiri said.

There are traditional communities in conserved areas which require to be left to the communities only to protect and not show the might of the forest departments and they do not require interventions of the Indian forest service officers, he added.

Civil society organisations argue that the 30x30 target, conceived in the drafting negotiation process between 2019 and early 2020, is now an outdated figure based on the latest understanding of science and technology.

These organisations also warn that the national pledges from countries to protect 30 per cent of their own territories by 2030 are now opening a vulnerability policy loop in the negotiations, which would allow further destruction in biodiversity-rich nations.

The government should facilitate community conservation through policy and legislative support and well-intended implementation, Lahiri said.

Therefore, if that transformation really takes place why 30x30 only, India can achieve more and does not require finance for that. Its political will and the change of mindset of the Indian forest service, he added.

The highlight of this COP would be the adoption of four goals and 22 targets as part of the Post-2020 Global Biodiversity Framework which will set the platform for biodiversity conservation.

The Indian delegation is led by Union Minister of Environment, Forest and Climate Change Bhupender Yadav, and a team of negotiators comprising senior officials from the Government of India. PTI SAR

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