THE TIMES OF INDIA

Most damage to forest floor soil, not to trees: Minister

Mar 27, 2023, 08.09 AM IST

Kolkata: Forest fires have a devastating impact on biodiversity and ecology, apart from contributing to global warming, said HS Debnath, chairman, West Bengal Biodiversity Board. "A forest fire causes the extinction of numerous plants and insects, loss of wildlife habitat and depletion of wildlife and also loss of natural regeneration of and reduction in forest cover," he said.

Forest minister Jyotipriya Mallick said most of the damage from the forest fires in Bengal was "to the soil of the forest floor, not to the trees". He also conceded that Bengal had never seen so many forest fires before 2021. "There have been six forest fires recently in Jhargram, South 24 Parganas, West Midnapore, Purulia and Bankura," he said, adding, "A big factor contributing to forest fires is the dearth of rain." The minister said the government was taking action to contain forest fires and restore soil pH levels. Measures were also being taken to spread awareness in forest-dwelling communities on ways to prevent fires.

Milan Mandal, the Sunderbans divisional forest officer (DFO), said leaves shed in winter makes the forest floor inflammable in rainless hot weather, affecting primarily deciduous trees in Purulia and Bankura.

Warm, dry winds during a rainless winter and spring could spread fires across a forest, said meteorologist G K Das. "Forest residents are advised to exercise precaution while cooking outdoors," he said. Early detection and timely intervention was the key to contain forest fires, said former forest officer Somnath Mukherjee. "There is satellite monitoring of forest fires. Real-time data is crucial to act against forest fires."

Environment minister Manas Bhunia said the risk of rising forest fires would not hamper the government's plan to plant trees along the 270km of Bengal's border, in order to prevent inter-state air pollution. "Local authorities, forest communities and the state government are united in this project," he said.