

# The Statesman

## Restoring fragmented forest cover essential for ecological balance

12 March 2023

NASA's Fire Information for Resource Management site reported that 1,156 forest fires were reported from India between February 13-20. Needless to say that these fires that make news every summer, devastate ecosystems and biodiversity and deplete India's forest cover which is already threatened by disruptive human activities.

"Habitat loss adversely impacts not only forest dependent wildlife but also the livelihoods of communities and the well-being of human settlements", says Supriya Patil, an environmentalist who works with social organisation Grow-Trees.com and adds, "India has pledged to restore 26 million hectares of degraded forests by 2030 and unless we stem habitat loss and minimise forest fires, it will be tough to fulfil this promise. Not just in India, but globally, wildlife habitats are diminishing. The World Wildlife Fund's 2022 Living Planet Report notes a 69 percent drop in wildlife species – mammals, birds, reptiles, amphibians and fish, across the world and this is deeply concerning as there is a direct correlation between deforestation and wildlife loss."

Patil cites the rising human-animal conflict in Uttarakhand and Madhya Pradesh as evidence that the loss of tree cover is a major factor disturbing wildlife and causing animals to wander into human settlements. According to the Global Forest Watch reports from 2021, 820 ha of native forest cover have been lost in Uttarakhand, the state with the most leopards.

Supriya notes that as a result of this loss, animals have begun to move into semi-urban and urban areas in quest of food and shelter.

As per the reports by Uttarakhand Forest Department, 76 leopards were declared a threat to the life of humans and were killed between the years 2001 and 2022. Similarly, the loss of forest land in Madhya Pradesh has resulted in the dispersal of tigers into human settlements and has caused a decline in the tiger population. There have been 38 tiger deaths in the state in 2022 alone and displaced elephants are also entering the paddy fields and residential areas in Madhya Pradesh from the bordering state of Chhattisgarh.

"Now, the villagers are resorting to beating drums, electric fences, high-intensity light and firecrackers to drive away these animals. However, these are not sustainable solutions. Only, thoughtful afforestation and conservation efforts can prevent human-animal conflicts in the long-run."

Grow-Trees.com's afforestation drives in Singhbhum, Jharkhand for elephants; Dachigam National Park, Kashmir for the critically endangered species of hangul; Kanha-Pench Corridor, Maharashtra for tigers; and Dindigul, Tamil Nadu for slender loris, hopes Supriya, will expand forest corridors and restore migration routes between fragmented areas. Apart from reversing the effect of climate change by sequestering carbon dioxide, these trees will also reduce soil erosion, assist in the regeneration of cultivated land, and promote rural employment. The social organisation has so far planted 9 million trees across India.

"We also sensitise villagers to the importance of conserving wildlife species and to the ill-effects of wildlife trafficking and human invasion into animal territories. For instance, once farming communities understand that animals like the slender loris protect the crop and eat away farm pests, they are less likely to attack them."

Supriya believes implementing fierce measures to drive away wild animals and killing them, will lead to their extinction and also create an irreparable ecological imbalance in the long run. "We must instead

take actionable steps at every level to expand forest cover and restore natural habitats for a stable human-wildlife co-existence,” she concludes.

Source: <https://www.thestatesman.com/lifestyle/restoring-fragmented-forest-cover-essential-for-ecological-balance-1503161569.html>