

2019 forest report a mixed bag

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While the mandarins at the policy-making level have much to rejoice as the report vindicates the hard work put in by foresters in States, the new parameters are food for thought for foresters and planners alike

The Forest Survey of India (FSI) had recently released its biennial State of Forest Report, 2019 and civil society is busy in analysing it. The FSI's reports are eagerly awaited by the Centre as they apprise the Union Government of the impact of its policies and an increase in forest and tree cover is a huge political gain. However, more often than not, the political masters are unwilling to acknowledge adverse impacts. Thankfully, the current assessment has shown an increase of 5,188 sq km of forest and tree cover (3,976 sq km of forest and 1,212 sq km of tree cover outside recorded forests). The total forest and tree cover in the country is 80.7 million ha (Mha) which corresponds to 24.56 per cent of the country's geographic area. The carbon stock is assessed at 7,124.6 million tonnes, an increase of 42.6 million tonnes compared to the 2017 assessment. For accuracy, the growing stock assessment was done with higher sampling intensity and uniformly-spread sample plots.

For the first time since 1985, this year's FSI report has provided enhanced information by adding more parameters. As around 32 Mha of forests are intimately linked to the livelihood of people living in 170,000 forest fringe villages, the FSI had calculated the dependency of people in each State for fuel wood, fodder, bamboo and small timber. The report gives State-wise details of removal of these items and per capita consumption. This is pertinent information for assessing the contribution of forests to the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and also for infusion of financial and technical resources for the management of forests, as a big chunk are not in a good shape. The ground-level information on changes in biodiversity and hydrology is key to combatting climate change and in this year's report the biodiversity and wetlands in 16 forest types have been assessed, which will assist foresters in planning management strategies.

The report provides details of five Non-Timber Forest Products (NTFPs) for each State, which reflects the contribution of this segment in the livelihood of rural and tribal belts. Most of the NTFP-producing trees and shrubs are under threat of overexploitation and poor regeneration. The planners, forest, tribal and rural development ministries must have a look at these statistics and plan their regeneration and efficient management accordingly.

The study also highlights forests occurring in different slopes, which are an indicator of the stability of the forest ecosystem. The report also reveals the threat of invasive species due to anthropological and climatic reasons, in each State.

It is well-known that around 28 per cent of the recorded forests (76.74 Mha) are without trees and comprise snow-covered mountains, glaciers, desert and inaccessible treeless rocky areas above the tree line. These areas are critical for our ecological and economical lifeline and are a continuous source of water for our rivers, agriculture and forest biodiversity. They must be integrated within the overall forest ecosystems though they may not technically qualify as forests. If we add this 21 Mha to the 80 Mha forest and tree cover, then the ecological life-sustaining system comes to around 101 Mha. Planners, therefore, need to spend at least a certain per cent of our GDP on this land's stability.

The 71.22 Mha of forest cover includes around 20 Mha of the tree/forests having areas over more than one ha outside recorded forest areas. The areas less than one ha (around 9.5 mha) outside recorded forests are clubbed

separately, which brings us to the figure of 80.7 Mha of total tree and forest cover and thus 24.56 per cent of the land mass.

The report, however, gives a dismal picture of forests in tribal districts, showing a decrease of forest cover to the tune of 741 sq km. The livelihood of tribals is dependent on forests and adequate steps must be taken for the productive management of land vested under the Forest Rights Act. Either the areas have been cleared of tree growth due to encroachments or the land use has changed in these forests. Another area of concern is that a large chunk of forests (30 Mha) are in the open category.

The report also gives a scary picture of the growing stock which shows extremely poor count of mature trees. Yet another worrying feature is that 36 per cent of the forests area is fire-prone. The North-east, central India and Himalayan forests are losing rich bio-diversity due to forest fires, which must be curbed.

While the mandarins at the policy-making level have much to rejoice as the report vindicates the hard work put in by foresters in States, the new parameters in the report are food for thought for foresters and planners alike to use the information for fine-tuning forest governance.

The report highlights that all is not well scientifically with our forest ecosystems and needs infusion of policy, institutional and technological inputs with a pragmatic forward-looking approach to forest management. The State Governments must see the tables for their areas and draw strategies for sustainable management of the forests. Unless this is done, the euphoria of increase in forest cover will be over in a few years.

The FSI had done a commendable job and the way this organisation's responsibilities are increasing, it needs substantial enhancement in manpower and technology so that it meets its ever-increasing mandate like the recent Supreme Court order on survey of illegal occupation of forest land. It is time its functioning is reviewed and the post of DG FSI and its regional centres need to be upgraded to attract and retain highly qualified professionals.

The organisation should be upgraded to the level of an attached office under the Ministry so that it can give executive directions required for better coordination with States in the implementation of the policies laid down by the Ministry. We owe this to our forests.

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