

All that trees do

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The whole is greater than the mere sum of its parts. The Supreme Court recently said that the amount of oxygen generated by a single tree in its lifetime must be considered while evaluating whether it can be felled. Indeed, in a world warming rapidly owing to an excess of greenhouse gases like carbon dioxide, the ability of trees to absorb carbon and yield oxygen is of utmost importance. But producing oxygen is just one of the many contributions of a tree — some of them extending beyond the realm of the environment. Each fully-grown tree also houses and feeds many other life forms. Taken together, as in forests, trees nurture entire ecosystems formed over millennia that are irreplaceable. This is exactly why the Centre's proposed green credit scheme is perilous. If implemented, the plan will replace the compensatory afforestation process by licencing private or public-private partnership companies to raise plantations near reserved forests that can be bought in lieu of forest diversion and clearance. But plantations cannot replace the biodiversity integral to natural forests. Yet, overlooking this distinction seems to have become the norm. *The State of Forest Report*, 2019 celebrates the growth in forest cover, conveniently glossing over the fact that it is open forests — they include commercial plantations, such as those of eucalyptus — which have increased while dense forests continue to diminish in size. India is

already contending with the fragmentation of forests and the spike in man-animal conflict, crises that this policy will augment. If private entities are now allowed to develop commercial plantations on so-called degraded forest land, the violation of land rights of forest communities, too, is bound to intensify.

Under the new scheme, if the company raising the plantation does not wish to trade, it can retain and harvest the plantation for timber once ready. This clause declares open season on India's forests and goes against the rehabilitative principle of compensatory afforestation which, while imperfect, seeks to restore the ecological imbalance. The problem is one of vision. The value of forests must be reimagined: that is exactly what the court had in mind, pushing the public discourse on nature beyond the narrow confines of profiteering. But if policy is to reflect this change in perspective, the apparatus of forest management must be made inclusive. The forest advisory committee — the green credit scheme is its brainchild — must work in tandem with all stakeholders, including independent voices, so as not to miss the wood for the trees.

Source: <https://www.telegraphindia.com/opinion/how-the-indian-government-proposed-green-credit-scheme-is-perilous-as-it-allows-plantations-in-lieu-of-losing-forest-cover/cid/1735550>