

Compensatory plantation leaves ‘forests sans trees’

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The village of Mebar, high up at 10,000 feet in the western Himalayas, is barely half a square km. Home to about 500, the village in Himachal Pradesh is hemmed in by three hydel projects and it is losing its green cover, only to be compensated with “forests” that have no trees.

“Half of our 200 Chilgoza trees were cut for these projects. Then, we are told afforestation is happening, but 5km away. Even those don’t survive,” Parmeshwar Negi, a local resident told TOI. The problem Negi and his village have been facing has been documented in a study published in ‘Land Use Policy’ journal on Elsevier this month.

Environmentalists Manshi Asher and Prakash Bhandari found only 10% of the saplings planted in plots marked for afforestation in Kinnaur, along the Tibet border. In three of the 22 plots they surveyed, not a single sapling was found. On paper, they were all compensatory “forests”.

“One thing that is often spoken about is that when trees are cut in one place, we are going to plant them in another place. We wanted to look at this idea of mitigation,” Asher said. The gaps are on many levels — the plantations are far from forest-dependent communities, they come up on land already forested, and they don’t end up conserving the species they destroy.