

Environmentalists call for increase in city forest area

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For a state that has one of the lowest forest area in the country, the scrapping of a proposed textile park project in the vicinity of the Mattewara forest area adjoining the Sutlej in Ludhiana by the state government has come as good news.

Environmentalists from city, who were a part of the protests against the proposed project, have hailed the decision and are now calling for increasing and conserving the forest cover in Amritsar.

A non-forest district of Punjab, Amritsar has approximately 1 per cent of the forest cover, which mostly includes pockets of Rakhs, earmarked as forest area in border belt. But environmentalists from city believe that Mattewara decision could be a game changer for the district.

“The scrapping of the textile park project signifies that the government is sensitive to environmental issues. We have no right to call ourselves Punjabis if we cannot keep the rivers of Punjab clean,” said Gunbir Singh, president, Dilbir Foundation, and former chairman of WWF-India (Punjab).

He said checking flow of pollutants into rivers is our duty. “No one discounts the need for responsible industrial progression thereby raising employment potential and creating opportunities for the youth of Punjab, but that requires a holistic plan to kick up entrepreneurship, encourage start-up culture and select the correct mix of scalable businesses suitable to Punjab’s ecology and economic needs of the future,” he said.

Gunbir Singh has been spearheading rigorous afforestation drives of native plants on government and private lands with public and private stakeholders.

Advocate Kuljeet Singh Malawali, patron, Maharaja Ranjit Singh Virasat Manch, who was an active participant in the protests held by locals and NGOs against the Mattewara project, said instead of destroying the already thin forest cover, government must focus on creating more forest areas.

The country’s forest policy mandates that 33 per cent of the total geographical area in a state must be under green cover, but in Punjab both forest and non-forest areas included, 6.5 per cent of the geographical area is under saplings, while 26.5 per cent of additional area has to be brought under the green cover. In this direction, the state government had set a target to plant saplings on 15 per cent of the area under the first phase of the plantation drive last year.

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