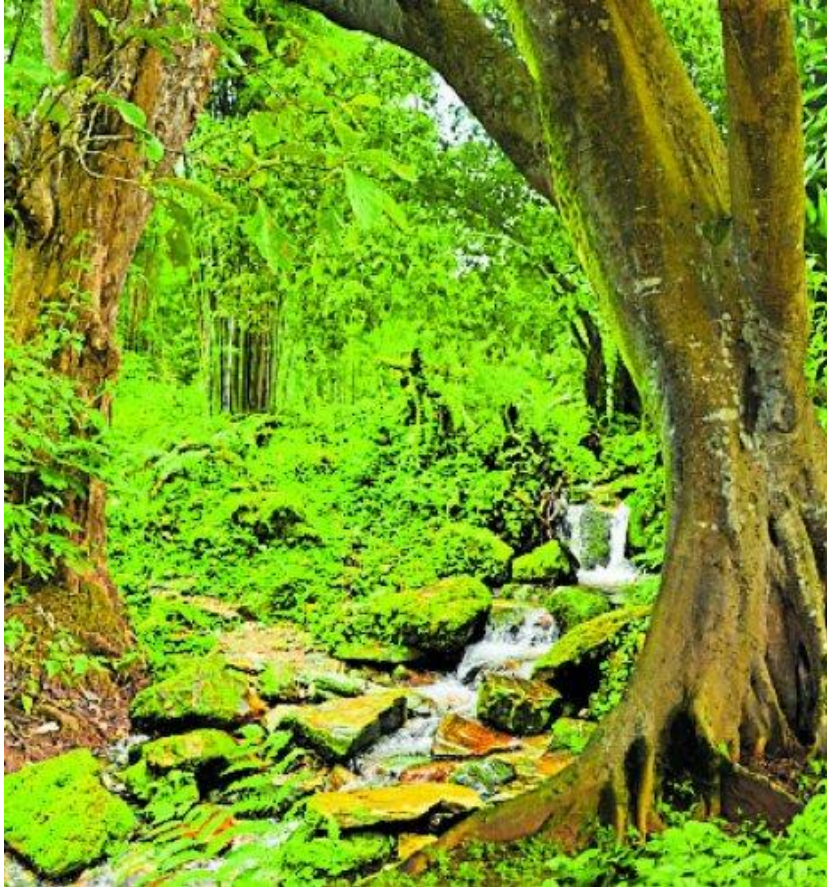


Global agreements crucial

23 March 2020



“Forest and Biodiversity: Too precious to lose” is the theme for the International Day of Forests which took place on March 21. Globally, forests cover about 30% of the total landmass and host more than 80% terrestrial biodiversity.

Forests provide habitat opportunity to biodiversity, while biodiversity makes a forest robust and resilient against disturbances. Forests and biodiversity thus drive sustenance from one another.

Biodiversity is the variety of living organisms and their habitats found in nature and include the interactions between the two. It is the single most important factor that underlies the production of forest ecosystem services. Such services include clean air, freshwater and climate regulation that are so vital for humans, besides the production of timber, fuel, food, fodder, fibre and medicine.

However, the global status of both - forests and biodiversity - is registering a declining trend. The Forest Assessment Report 2015 of the United Nations (UN) Food and Agriculture

Organisation (FAO) has reported a reduction in the global forest area from 31.6% to 30.6% between 1990 and 2015.

Also, the UN-backed Inter-governmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) reported in May 2019 that about one million plant and animal species are under the threat of extinction. Forests, particularly in the tropics, are under tremendous pressure as the market economy continues to take precedence over and impinge the environment.

Moreover, the scientific and anecdotal evidence for the adverse impact of global warming on forest ecosystems and biodiversity is mounting, and projections suggest catastrophic environmental risks under business-as-usual socio-economic scenario by the end of the 21st century.

Our capability to deal with the impact of worsening climatic and non-climatic changes on the human and natural systems is constrained, inter alia, by the globally prevalent extreme poverty, hunger, illiteracy, gender inequality, and the degraded status of our environment.

In this scenario, alongside other measures, the global community has resolved to enhance the status of our forests and biodiversity as a practical, robust and no-regrets strategy to manage the risk.

Global effort: Since the 1992 Rio de Janeiro Earth Summit, the global community is actively seeking redressal for deforestation, desertification and loss of biodiversity issues.

Further, to meet the socio-economic and geopolitical challenges in addressing these issues, a number of assessment and developmental initiatives that cater to and are rooted in the enhancement of the status of natural resources such as land, water, , forest and biodiversity, have been undertaken.

These include Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) (2000), Millennium Ecosystem Assessment (2001), Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (2015), Paris Agreement on Climate Change (2015) and the UN Strategic Plan for Forests 2030 (2017).

The Sustainable Development Report 2019 has assessed low sustainable development index (SDI) ratings on the SDG 15 (life on land) that concerns forest and biodiversity. The report notes alarming adverse trend with regard to SDG 15 and identifies the need for undertaking transformational measures. India ranks 115th on the index with a score of 61.1.

Recently, India hosted the 14th Conference of Parties (CoP) of the UN Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD). The CoP has recognised land restoration as cheapest solution to biodiversity loss. Under the convention, India is committed to land degradation neutrality by 2030.

Further, under the Bonn Challenge to restore deforested and degraded lands, India is committed to restore 26 million hectares by 2030. Similarly, towards the global forest goal of enhancing forests by 3% under the UN Strategic Plan on Forests (UNSPF) 2017-30, India

has committed addition of 2 lakh hectare of forest and tree cover annually as a voluntary national contribution.

Efforts on the ground: To meet the aspirations under the above mentioned global programmes, collaborative action involving all the state and non-state players is necessary. In India, forest and biodiversity-based goals are primarily driven by the State Forest Departments (SFDs) with the assistance of other stakeholders.

The SFDs face significant challenges on the ground while harmonising the demands on forests (and forestland) with the objectives of forest and biodiversity conservation.

Despite the incessant demand on forests, the efforts of SFDs have yielded an increasing trend in forest cover and tree cover in the country. The Forest Survey of India has reported an increase of 5.20 lakh hectare in forest and tree cover in India between 2017 and 2019.

The increase is led by Karnataka with 1.57 lakh hectare. With 524 tigers, Karnataka is at second place after Madhya Pradesh (526 tigers). These indicate the success of plantation and conservation programs in the state.

Presently, the major issues addressed by the Karnataka Forest Department (KFD) include man-animal conflict, forest fires, forestland encroachment, climate change, and expansion of tree growth outside designated forest areas. To meet these needs, several initiatives have been undertaken by the Department.

A web-based system for early detection of fire has been developed. Based on the forecast of weather parameters, this system is also capable of generating fire vulnerability warning. A mobile phone-based system for payment of wildlife damage compensation is in practice.

Another such system helps forest staff in the detection of forest boundaries on the ground. Krushi Aranya Protsaha Yojane that incentivises planting of seedlings in farmer's land is in operation. The Department is also in the process of testing a web-based tree canopy cover change-detection system for identification of forest land encroachment in the initiation stages.

These measures and advance tools would further strengthen the capability of KFD to monitor the factors of disturbance such as forest fire and forestland encroachment.

The success of planting and conservation programmes in the state, and the technology-based path-defining initiatives anchored by the ICT (Information and communications technology) wing of the Department, are likely to motivate other forest departments in the country. Such successes and efforts would contribute to the global aim of forest and biodiversity enhancement for realising SDGs.

Source: <https://www.deccanherald.com/opinion/comment/global-agreements-crucial-816760.html>