THE WEEK

Global forest area decreased by over 60 per cent in six decades: Study

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The global forest area per capita has decreased by over 60 per cent over the past 60 years, a loss that threatens the future of biodiversity and impacts the lives of 1.6 billion people worldwide, according to a study.

The research, published in the journal Environmental Research Letters, found that the global forest area has declined by 81.7 million hectares from 1960 to 2019, with gross forest loss outweighing gross forest gain.

The researchers from the Forestry and Forest Products Research Institute (FFPRI) in Japan used global land use dataset to examine how global forests have changed over space and time.

They found that decline in global forests combined with the increase in global population over the 60-year period has resulted in a decrease of the global forest area per capita by over 60 per cent, from 1.4 hectares in 1960 to 0.5 hectares in 2019.

"The continuous loss and degradation of forests affect the integrity of forest ecosystems, reducing their ability to generate and provide essential services and sustain biodiversity," the researchers said.

"It also impacts the lives of at least 1.6 billion people worldwide, predominantly in developing countries, who depend on forests for various purposes," they said.

The results also showed that the change in the spatiotemporal pattern of global forests supports the forest transition theory, with forest losses occurring primarily in the lower-income countries in the tropics and forest gains in the higher-income countries in the extratropics.

"Despite this spatial pattern of forest loss occurring primarily in the less developed countries, the role of more developed nations in this said forest loss also needs to be studied more deeply," said Ronald C. Estoque, the lead author of the study.

"With the strengthening of forest conservation in more developed countries, forest loss is displaced to the less developed countries, especially in the tropics," Estoque said.

The researchers noted that monitoring of the world's forests is an integral part of various global environmental and social initiatives, including the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the Paris Climate Agreement and the Post-2020 Global Biodiversity Framework.

To help achieve the goals of these initiatives, there is a profound need to reverse, or at least flatten, the global net forest loss curve by conserving the world's remaining forests and restoring and rehabilitating degraded forest landscapes, they added.