



## India's forest cover increased in 2019-21, but that may not be good news; here's why

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India's forest and tree cover increased by more than 1,500 sq km between 2019 and 2021, taking the country's total forest area to 80.9 million hectares, Bhupender Yadav, Minister for Environment, Forest and Climate Change, said while releasing the 'India State of Forest Report 2021' on January 13.

The report, prepared by the Forest Survey of India, said 17 states and Union Territories in India now had over 33 percent of the geographical area under forest cover. However, on closer inspection, the report raises some serious concerns.

India lost more than 1,600 sq km of natural forests between 2019 and 2021 as more areas came under plantation which experts argue is no substitute for natural forests, The Indian Express reported.

When the Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO) brought plantations within the ambit of forests in 2017, more than 200 scientific bodies, conservation agencies and NGOs had criticised the move. Plantations have even-aged trees of the same species which are of some economic value and utility as carbon sinks, but they cannot be compared with natural forests, The Indian Express report said.

The loss of over 1,000 sq km of natural forests in the Northeast can lead to water scarcity, which is already a serious problem in the region. According to the forest report, the forest cover was lost due to natural calamities, felling of trees, developmental activities and shifting agriculture.

The report said the total forest cover is 21.71 percent of the total geographical area in 2021, compared with 21.67 percent in 2019 and 21.54 percent in 2017.

As part of its National Forest Policy, 1988, India plans to bring 33 percent of its geographical area under forest cover. The target was enlisted as one of the primary areas of focus in the *Strategy for New India @ 75* released by Niti Aayog in 2018 for a clean, green and healthy environment.

However, the government is off-target when it comes to increasing forest cover, Down to Earth reported.

The marginal growth in forest cover in 2021 was led by the rise in open forest areas that are used for commercial plantations. During the period between 2019 and 2021, areas under open forests increased 0.09 percent or 1,582 sq km.

Meanwhile, the document revealed that moderately dense forests or areas near human habitations were on a decline during the period. Areas under moderately dense forests decreased 0.05 percent or 2,621 sq km, the report said.

Moderately dense forests have a tree canopy density of 40-70 percent, while a dense forest has a tree canopy density of 70 percent or above.

The decrease in moderately dense forest area comes after a marginal increase of 0.04 percent or 154 sq km between 2017 and 2019.

Since 2011, India has continuously lost areas under moderately dense forests, except for the short span of time between 2017 and 2019.

In the last 10 years between 2011 and 2021, India lost 4.3 percent of the area under moderately dense forests, the Down to Earth report said.

Another cause of concern is the loss in the forest cover of some of the tiger reserves such as the Sunderbans.

Source: <https://www.cnbcvtv18.com/environment/indias-forest-cover-increased-in-2019-21-but-that-may-not-be-good-news-heres-why-12163712.htm>