

Nicobar green swap: 22.4k ha in NCR Aravalis get 'protected forest' tag

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Gurgaon: Around 85% of the Aravali land, which was to be included in the compensatory afforestation plan, has finally got legal cover as 'protected forest'. A total of 22,425ha of land spread across five districts of Haryana have been notified now.

The gain for the Aravalis, which have degraded over the years due to mining and construction, comes at the cost of tropical rainforests in Great Nicobar. In Nov 2022, the ministry of environment, forest and climate change (MoEFCC) had cleared the decks for a mega project to build an international airport, a shipment port, a power plant and a township over 160sq km of land, over 80% of which are forests on the island.

Compensatory afforestation to make up for this loss of forest in Nicobar was decided to be carried out in the Aravalis, some 2,400km apart. The process to identify Aravali land for compensatory afforestation began in Feb 2023.

The five districts, which have been included in the plan, are Gurgaon, Nuh, Rewari, Mahendergarh and Charkhi Dadri.

Till now, 22,425ha have been notified as 'protected forest' and 1,928ha will get the tag soon.

In Gurgaon, 1,194ha have been notified. A total of 11,118ha got the protected tag in Nuh, followed by Rewari (3,582ha) and Mahendergarh (6,530ha). An additional 1,306ha in Gurgaon, 24ha in Mahendergarh and 596ha in Charkhi Dadri will get the tag soon.

Any non-forest activity such as construction, cattle grazing and pasturing, fishing, hunting is barred in these areas.

Exceptions are only allowed if the forest department gives its permission.

“We will also notify the remaining 1,647ha of land to achieve the target. We are also in the process of finalising the proposal for restoration and compensatory afforestation action plan. This will be submitted to the forest ministry for final nod,” said a forest official.

The notification will be a fillip to Haryana’s recorded forest area. According to a Forest Survey of India (FSI) assessment in 2021, the state has 34,500ha of recorded forest cover, but another 1.3 lakh ha are not officially tagged, keeping them out of the purview of any protection.

The state is fast losing forest cover. The same report by FSI had noted that Gurgaon alone lost 247 ha of forest cover between 2019 and 2020.

In Gurgaon, the notified Aravali forest areas under the swap are spread across six villages — Ghamroj, Alipur, Tikli, Sakatpur, Gairatpur Bas and Aklimpur.

Another 34 villages in Rewari, 68 villages in Nuh and 53 villages in Mahendergarh have also got protected land. Earlier, these areas were owned by village panchayats, and thus the forest department was unable to protect them from getting encroached.

Meanwhile, activists questioned how compensatory afforestation in Haryana would help reduce the environmental impact of the loss of greenery in Nicobar.

“Why has govt not included Faridabad’s forest areas in the notified land? Several real estate firms have bought land in the Faridabad Aravalis. Why is govt not trying to save those areas?” asked Vivek Kamboj, an environmentalist.

Responding to this, a forest official said they didn’t include the Faridabad Aravalis as there wasn’t a suitable continuous tract of forest land for afforestation.

