

Uttarakhand lost 50,000 hectares of forest cover in 20 years

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DEHRADUN: Uttarakhand, the birthplace of India's major rivers like Ganga and Yamuna and home to the Himalayan ranges, is rapidly losing its forest land to commercial activities. Data of forest department exclusively accessed by TOI has revealed that the state, which has over 70% forest land, has lost about 50,000 hectares (ha) of its forests to various developmental activities in the past 20 years.

The top six activities for which around 21,207 hectares of forest land in the state has been diverted are mining, hydropower plants, road construction, power distribution lines, water pipelines and irrigation. The highest amount of forest cover has been lost to mining (8,760 ha) followed by road construction (7,539 ha), power distribution lines (2,332 ha) and

hydropower plant projects (2,295 ha). Other smaller activities together claimed 20,998 hectares of forest cover, the data reveals. The other activities comprise of laying down of optical fibres, railways, defence works, rehabilitation, construction of buildings etc.

A district-wise analysis (from November 2000 to March 2020) shows that Dehradun (21,303 ha) lost the maximum forest area, followed by Haridwar which lost 6,826 hectares, Chamoli (3,636 ha), Tehri (2,671 ha) and Pithoragarh (2,451 ha). This diversion of forest land for commercial activities is alarming when seen in the backdrop of the latest report of the Forest Survey of India (India State Forest Report 2019) which indicates that three districts — Nainital, Udham Singh Nagar and Haridwar — have seen negative growth in their forest cover — of -6.4%, -4.2% and -2.7% respectively — from 2017 to 2019.

Doon-based environmentalist and Padma Bhushan awardee Anil Joshi told TOI, “How can we ask for ‘green bonus’ from the Centre when we are not sensitive about our green cover?” Uttarakhand’s forest cover is spread over around 38,000 sq km, which is 71% of the state’s geographical area. It has 112 species of trees, 73 species of shrubs and 94 species of herbs, all of which, scientists say, are facing ‘the heat of development activities.’

“We strictly adhere to the norms of the Centre as per which mining has to be conducted only after due environmental clearances and in a sustainable manner and only upto a certain depth,” said Vinod Kumar, managing director of Uttarakhand Forest Development Corporation.