



KAMARAJ IAS ACADEMY
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Healthy forests for healthy people

Published On: 21-03-2023

Why is in news? The United Nations General Assembly declared 21 March as the International Day of Forests (IDF)

International Day of Forests 2023

The United Nations General Assembly declared 21 March as the International Day of Forests (IDF) in 2012.

The IDF raises awareness of the indispensable role of different types of forests in supporting a wide range of benefits to human health that include food security and nutrition, thereby aligning with the 2030 Agenda of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 3 (Good health and well-being) and SDG 15 (Life on land).

Importance of Forest

Forests are of global importance. Forests provide habitat for 80% of amphibian species, 75% of bird species, and 68% of mammal species.

More than 18% of the total forest area is in legally established protected areas. Nevertheless, forest biodiversity remains under threat from deforestation and forest degradation.

The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO's) latest report on State of the World's Forests (2022) states that forests cover 31% of the Earth's land surface (4.06 billion ha) but the area is shrinking, with 420 million ha of forests lost due to deforestation between 1990 and 2020.

The rate of deforestation is declining but was still 10 million ha per year during the period of 2015–2020.

Role of forest in combating climate change

A robust forest ecosystem acts as a vital carbon sink.

The Indian State of Forest Report (ISFR) estimates the carbon stock (which is the quantity of carbon sequestered from the atmosphere and stored in biomass, deadwood, soil, and litter in the forest) of forests to be about 7,204 million tonnes in 2019, which is an increase of 79.4 million tonnes of carbon stock as compared to the estimates in 2017.

Among the Indian states, Arunachal Pradesh has the maximum carbon stock in forests (1023.84 million tonnes), followed by Madhya Pradesh (609.25 million tonnes).

Major threats to Forest

Climate change is a major threat to forest health and this is manifested in a number of ways. For instance, there are indications that the incidence and severity of forest fires and pests are increasing.

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The COVID-19 pandemic also had a significant impact on forest value chains and trade in early 2020. There is a possible longer-term link between forests and disease.

More than 30% of new diseases since 1960 are ascribed to land-use change, including deforestation, and 15% of 250 emerging infectious diseases have been linked to forests.

Deforestation, specifically in the tropics, has been associated with an increase in infectious diseases such as malaria and dengue.

Moreover, worldwide almost 90% of deforestation is driven by agricultural expansion such as the conversion of forest to cropland or grassland for livestock grazing.

India's Measure for conservation of forest

The Government of India (GoI) has launched a global movement on Lifestyle for Environment (LiFE), or Mission LiFE.

This is designed with the objective of mobilizing at least one billion Indians and other global citizens to take individual and collective action for protecting and conserving the environment.

In India, at least 80% of all villages and urban local bodies are intended to become environment-friendly by 2028.

As per the Economic Survey of India (2022-23), one of the quantifiable targets of India's nationally determined contributions (NDCs) is to achieve an additional carbon sink of 2.5 billion to 3.0 billion tonnes through additional forest and tree cover by 2030.

The country ranks third globally with respect to the net gain in average annual forest area between 2010 and 2020. This gain is mainly attributed to the robust framework and policies of the GoI and State governments that have promoted and protected forests.

Initiatives such as the National Afforestation Programme (NAP), Green India Mission (GIM), Compensatory Afforestation Fund Management and Planning Authority (CAMPA), Green Highway Policy-2015, Policy for enhancement of Urban Greens, National Agro-forestry Policy, and Sub-Mission on Agro-forestry (SMAF) are among the key ones.

The FAO bolsters GoI's efforts in the conservation of forest landscapes by fostering sustainable agrifood systems.

FAO works in 8 States, viz., Chhattisgarh, Haryana, Madhya Pradesh, Mizoram, Odisha, Punjab, Rajasthan, and Uttarakhand, to promote the diversification of crops and restoration of landscapes.

These efforts seek to mainstream biodiversity conservation, climate change, and sustainable land management objectives and practices into Indian agriculture to enhance multiple global environment benefits (GEBs).

The way ahead

FAO's report on the State of the World's Forests (2022) suggests three forest-based pathways as a means for tackling local to global challenges

first, halting deforestation and maintaining forests

second, restoring degraded lands and expanding agroforestry; and finally yet importantly, sustainably using forests and building green value chains.

Governments and business entities need to direct funding for a recovery towards long-term policies aimed at creating sustainable and green jobs and further mobilizing private sector investment, and empowering and incentivizing local actors to take a leading role in the forest pathways.

Healthy forests are crucial for all aspects of a healthy planet, from livelihoods and nutrition to biodiversity and the environment, but they are facing risk. It's up to us to safeguard these priceless natural resources.