

This article is related to General Studies-Paper-II (Environment & Ecology)

Indian Express

06 Jan., 2020

"State of Forest Report 2019 has shown a 1,275 sq km gain in very dense forest, but what this statistic masks is the fact that the country continues to lose its best natural forests. A look at what was gained and lost."

India's forest cover has increased by 3,976 sq km or 0.56% since 2017. For the second successive time since 2007, the biennial State of Forest Report (SFR) recorded a gain — an impressive 1,275 sq km — in dense forest (including Very Dense Forest with a canopy density of over 70%, and Moderately Dense Forest with a canopy density of 40-70%). Given the pressure on forest land and natural resources, these figures have made happy headlines. But they do not tell how India continues to lose some of its best natural forests — a reality documented in the SFR itself.

Balance sheet

- SFR data show 2,145 sq km of dense forests became non-forests since 2017. A dense forest can deteriorate into an open forest (10-40% canopy density) but conversion to non-forest signifies total destruction. This means India has lost dense forests one-and-a-half times Delhi's expanse in just two years.
- Since 2017, plantations with high canopy density have added 2,441 sq km to the dense forest category, while 1,858 sq km of non-forests have become dense forests. These are plantations of fast-growing species since natural forests rarely grow so fast.
- Since 2003 when data on "change matrix" were first made available, 18,065 sq km — more than one-third of Punjab's landmass — of dense forests have become non-forests in the country, nearly half of this (8,552 sq km) in the last four years.
- Making up for much of this destruction of quality natural forests, 10,227 sq km of non-forests (read plantations) became dense forests in successive two-year windows since 2003, over half of this (5,458 sq km) since 2015.
- While hill forests have gained in quality, large tracts of tropical forests have fallen off the "dense" category since 2017. The biggest loss — 23,550 sq km — is under the tropical semi-evergreen head in SFR 2019. In India, tropical semi-evergreen forests are found along the western coast, lower slopes of the eastern Himalayas, Odisha and Andamans.
- Of India's 7.12 lakh sq km forest cover, 52,000 sq km is plantations that, in any case, cannot substitute natural forests in biodiversity or ecological services.
- Of 7,28,520 sq km recorded forest area from digitised data and the Survey of India's topographic maps of greenwash areas (forestland), 2,15,084 sq km (nearly 30%) recorded no forest cover in SFR 2019. In other words, forestland roughly the combined area of Tamil Nadu and West Bengal holds no forests.
- There has been no recovery since 2017 as forest cover on forestland has shrunk by 330 sq km in the last two years.

