

Patchy green

India's forest policy dates back to the times when climate change was a fuzzy concept, even in environmentalist circles. It had come into effect when the liberalisation of the country's economy had not begun and the Forest Rights Act was about 18 years away. The government's decision to replace The National Forest Policy, 1988 with protocols that are in tune with the changed realities was, therefore, long overdue. Last week, the Ministry of Environment, Forests and Climate Change placed the Draft National Forest Policy, 2018 on its website and invited comments from "all stakeholders". The draft ticks quite a few boxes.

It emphasises that "climate change concerns will be factored in forest and wildlife areas, working and management plans". It also talks of "safeguarding the livelihood security of people". It envisages raising the country's forest cover from 25 per cent to 30 per cent of its land area. Herein lies the draft's main weakness: It persists with the methodological weakness of the Indian Forest Survey Reports of the past 30 years that conflate plantations with forest cover.

"Productivity of forest plantations are poor in most states. This will be addressed by the intensive scientific management of forest plantations of commercially important species," the draft notes. It does mention native plants like bamboo but stresses the need for plantations of exotics like eucalyptus and casuarina. There is now compelling evidence that plantations are no substitute for biodiverse ecosystems comprising indigenous species when it comes to climate change mitigation. A study in Nature in May 2015, for example, cautioned against "promoting intensive forestry for maximum timber yield under the flag of climate change". "Forestry practices that preserve natural ecosystem processes are likely to be more effective in the resilience against climate change," it said.

It is, however, not just a matter of exotics versus indigenous species. A growing body of literature now shows that regenerating forests is not enough to check global warming. Global bodies like the FAO stress that the carbon cycle in forests — this varies from forest to forest — is a key factor in their role as climate change mitigating agents. India has been an outlier to such nuanced studies. The draft forest policy does not offer a roadmap to overcome this shortcoming. The government should take care of such concerns while finalising the new forest policy.

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