

India records marginal increase in forest cover

India posted a marginal 0.21% rise in the area under forest between 2015 and 2017, according to the biennial India State of Forest Report (SFR) 2017. The document says that India has about 7,08,273 square kilometres of forest, which is 21.53% of the geographic area of the country (32,87,569 sq. km).

Getting India to have at least 33% of its area under forest has been a long standing goal of the government since 1988.

The 21% mark

However various editions of the SFR over the years, have reported the area under forests as hovering around 21%. So the government also includes substantial patches of trees outside areas designated as forests — such as plantations or greenlands — in its assessment. The total tree cover, according to this assessment, was 93,815 square kilometres or a 2% rise from the approximately 92,500 square kilometres estimated in 2015.

Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and Kerala topped the States that posted an increase in forest cover. “Much of this increase can be attributed to plantation and conservation activities both within and outside the Recorded Forest areas as well as an improvement in interpretation of satellite data,” the survey notes.

Currently, 15 States and union territories have 33% of their geographical area under forests. In India’s north-east however, forest cover showed a decrease; 1,71,306 square kilometres, or 65.34%, of the geographical area was under forest and this was a 630 square kilometre decline from the 2015 assessment.

The category of ‘very dense forest’— defined as a canopy cover over 70% — and an indicator of the quality of a forest, saw a dramatic rise from 85,904 square kilometres to 98,158 square kilometres this year but the category of ‘moderately dense forest’ (40%-70%) saw a 7,056 square kilometre-decline from 2015.

“In different categories of forests there may be fluctuations within categories. However we are soon coming up with a comprehensive policy to address this,” said Siddhanta Das, Director General of Forests.

Union Environment Minister Harsh Vardhan lauded the survey findings.

“India is ranked 10th in the world, with 24.4% of land area under forest and tree cover, even though it accounts for 2.4% of the world surface area and sustains the needs of 17% of human and 18% livestock population,” he said at a press conference to release the survey results.

The forest survey for the first time mapped 633 districts and relied on satellite-mapping. Earlier this year, the government ceased to define bamboo as a tree to promote economic activity among tribals. The survey found that India’s bamboo bearing area rose by 1.73 million hectares (2011) to 15.69 million hectares (2017).

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