

# ONE-FIFTH OF COUNTRY'S FORESTS PRONE TO FIRES: STUDY

Relevant for: Environment | Topic: Disaster and disaster management

About 21.40% of forest cover in India is prone to fires, with forests in the north-eastern region and central India being the most vulnerable, the 2019 report by the Forest Survey of India (FSI) has said.

The finding has emerged from a study carried out by the FSI along forest fire points identified across the country from 2004 to 2017.

The forest fire points (FFP) identified during the 13 years add up to 2,77,758. They were analysed using a moderate resolution imaging spectroradiometer (MODIS) by overlaying the points coverage over the grid coverage of 5 km x 5 km.

The analysis showed that extremely fire prone areas account for 3.89% of total forest cover, very highly fire prone areas account for 6.01% and highly fire prone areas for 11.50%. Together, the three categories come to 21.40 % of forest cover.

The total number of alerts issued for each state based on MODIS data from November 2018 to June 2019 were 29,547 and interestingly, Mizoram, a small State, recorded the highest number of fire alerts (2,795). The seven States of the north-eastern region accounted for 10,210 fire alerts, which make up about one-third of alerts in the country.

Lalit Kumar Sharma, a scientist with the Zoological Survey of India, said that one of the major reasons for forest fires in the north-east is slash-and-burn cultivation, commonly called jhoom or jhum cultivation. "My experience is that most forest fires in Mizoram are because of jhum cultivation. The fires happen between the months of January and March. The north-east has tropical evergreen forests and, unlike the dry deciduous forests of central India, these are not likely to catch fire easily," Mr. Sharma said.

## Green cover

While the overall green cover has increased in the country, the forest cover in the north-east — particularly in Mizoram, Arunachal Pradesh and Nagaland — has decreased. On being asked if there was a link between forest cover reduction and fires, Mr. Sharma said the fires could be one of the causes.

Central Indian States also recorded a high number of forest fire alerts, with Madhya Pradesh accounting for 2,723 alerts; Maharashtra 2,516; Odisha 2,213 and Chattisgarh 1,008 alerts between November 2018 to June 2019.

According to Mr. Sharma, the reasons for fires here are manmade, particularly in cases where people visit forests and leave burning bidis, cigarette stubs or other inflammable materials.

In cases of natural reasons, the scientist pointed to thunderstorms as the most likely cause.

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