

OVERALL GREEN COVER RISES, BUT NORTH-EAST RECORDS DIP

Relevant for: Environment | Topic: Biodiversity, Ecology, and Wildlife Related Issues

A rich and thick forest in Chhattisgarh. | Photo Credit: [Akhilesh Kumar](#)

The forest cover in the country increased by 3,976 square kilometres (sqkm) but with the sharpest declines in the northeastern States of Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur and Mizoram, according to the 2019 edition of the India State of Forest Report (ISFR) that was made public on Monday. At 712,249 sqkm, the forest cover constituted 21.67% of the nation's geographical area or 0.12% more than last year.

The ISFR, a biennial exercise, assesses the forest and tree cover, bamboo resources, carbon stock and forest fires.

The top three States showing an increase in forest cover are Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and Kerala.

Tree cover, defined as patches of trees less than 1 hectare and occurring outside the recorded forest area, grew by 1, 212 sqkm. Tree and forest cover together made up 25.56% of India's area. In the last assessment it was 24.39%.

Environment Minister Prakash Javadekar said the declines in the Northeast weren't "yet a matter of concern." The States had a much higher proportion of forest than most States—Mizoram (85.4%), Arunachal Pradesh (79.63%) and Nagaland (75%)--and the declines in forest were still small. The Centre had policies in place to address this over the long term.

Mr. Javadekar explained the decline in tree cover inside forests as due to tribal populations getting "land titles" (patta) and the rise in trees outside the forest area as due to an increase in tree plantation and afforestation activities.

The report, however, shows that the quality of this forest—in terms of the canopy density of the trees comprising forest patches—is wavering. While 1,755 sqkm of 'moderately dense forest' (MDF) became 'Very dense forest (VDF), 2782 sqkm of MDF regressed into lower quality 'open forest (OF), 'Scrub forest' or 'Non forest.' VDF, which represents the lushest vegetation and has canopy density above 70%, increased by 1,120 sqkm over the assessment of 2017.

The forest cover within the Recorded Forest Area, or that which has been officially classified by States or the Centre as 'forest,' showed a 330 sqkm decrease, but 'forest' outside such recorded area increased by 4,306 sqkm. Tree outside forest was found to comprise nearly 29.38 million hectares, which was 36.4% of the total tree and forest cover in the country. Maharashtra had the largest extent of such tree outside forest.

The nation's tree and forest cover has largely hovered from 21-25% and is short of the National Forest Policy, 1988, which envisages 33% to be under such cover.

The mangrove cover increased by 54 sqkm, or about 1%, from the last assessment, with Gujarat and Maharashtra registering the largest improvements. The total bamboo bearing area was estimated to be 160, 037 sqkm and increased by 3,229 sqkm, compared to the 2017 estimate.

The total carbon stock of the country was estimated at 7124 million tons, which is an increase of 42.6 million tons from the last assessment.

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