

Pakistan's arid land transforms into green gold

Greenery all around: Pervaiz Manan, head of the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Forest Department, who oversaw the re-vegetation of Heroshah district. AFP/FAROOQ NAEEM

Around the region of Heroshah, previously arid hills are now covered with forest as far as the horizon. In northwestern Pakistan, hundreds of millions of trees have been planted to fight deforestation.

In 2015 and 2016, some 16,000 labourers planted more than 9,00,000 fast-growing eucalyptus trees at regular, geometric intervals in Heroshah — and the titanic task is just a fraction of the effort across the province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

Control against erosion

“Before it was completely burnt land. Now they have green gold in their hands,” commented forest manager Pervaiz Manan as he displayed pictures of the site previously, when only sparse blades of tall grass interrupted the monotonous landscape.

The new trees will reinvigorate the area's scenic beauty, act as a control against erosion, help mitigate climate change, decrease the chances of floods and increase the chances of precipitation, says Mr. Manan, who oversaw the re-vegetation of Heroshah.

Residents also see them as an economic boost — which, officials hope, will deter them from cutting the new growth down to use as firewood in a region where electricity can be sparse.

Further north, in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's Swat, many of the high valleys were denuded by the Pakistan Taliban during their reign from 2006 to 2009.

Now they are covered in pine saplings. “You can't walk without stepping on a seedling,” smiles Yusuf Khan, another forest department worker.

The Heroshah and Swat plantations are part of the “Billion Tree Tsunami”, a provincial government programme that has seen a total of 300 million trees of 42 different species planted across the province.

A further 150 million plants were given to landowners, while strict forest regeneration measures have allowed the regrowth of 730 million trees — roughly 1.2 billion new trees in total, says the programme's management.

Ambitious goal

Kamran Hussain, a manager of the Pakistani branch of the World Wildlife Fund, who conducted an independent audit of the project, says their figures showed slightly less — but still above target at 1.06 billion trees.

The Billion Tree Tsunami, which cost the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa government \$169 million, started in November 2014. Officials say they are still implementing maintenance safeguards such as fire protection, with the project due to be completed in June 2020.

END

crackIAS.com