

INDIA CAN'T AFFORD TO HAVE BANDIPUR-TYPE FOREST FIRES

Relevant for: Environment | Topic: Disaster and disaster management

On February 21, a major fire broke out in the Bandipur Tiger Reserve in Karnataka, which is home to not just tigers but also elephants, spotted deer, bison and antelopes. The fire was so severe that it took five days for the Indian Air Force and the forest officials, to douse the flames. Karnataka forest officials suspect that vandals are behind the fire. Other factors helped too: the current phase of hot and dry weather in Karnataka and Tamil Nadu, leading to the crackling dry forest; and high speed winds. On February 25, the National Remote Sensing Centre estimated that about 4,419.54 hectares or 10,920 acres of the forest were affected.

In India, forest fires peak during the dry months of March or April before the arrival of the monsoon. To minimise the risk of such fires, the forest departments must improve their management protocols by addressing certain challenges, says a 2018 World Bank Report: The lack of an adequate number of forest personnel, a wide variation in how forest fires are treated in disaster planning, and how institutional mechanisms are set up for organising the response to large fires. The report also suggested that the removal of dead hardwood trees, which create the potential for intense fires, could help reduce the number of incidents. It is also important to maintain basic fire lines (a gap in vegetation or other combustible material in the forest), which can slow down or stop the progress of a wildfire.

India cannot afford to have more Bandipur-type devastations because our forests are already under stress, thanks to increasing development needs, land management practices, excessive demand on forest resources, negligence, and climate variations. Forest fires also pose a serious threat to India's ability to expand its forest and tree cover by 2030. This could create an additional carbon sink of 2.5 to 3 billion tonnes of CO₂ equivalent, in keeping with its Nationally Determined Contribution, which is at the heart of the Paris Climate Agreement and the achievement of its long-term goals.

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