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HARM IN THE NAME OF GOOD

Relevant for: Environment | Topic: Environmental Conservation, Sustainable Development, and EIA

The UN General Assembly has proclaimed March 21 as the International Day of Forests to celebrate and raise awareness about the importance of forests. On this day, countries are encouraged to organise activities such as tree planting campaigns to help increase the green cover, conserve biodiversity, and fight climate change. For decades, the Indian government has been spending billions of rupees in its efforts to increase the green cover through tree planting. Recently, the Central government, through the National Afforestation and Eco-Development Board, launched an ambitious 19,000 crore plan for an afforestation project to rejuvenate 13 major rivers. A press note from the government announced that “this project would increase ‘forest’ cover by 7,417.36 square kilometres in the vicinity of these rivers”. Will such a project really increase forest cover? And can forests be created through afforestation?

Forests are complex ecosystems that are built over years due to the interplay of birds, mammals, reptiles, insects, amphibians, fungi, microorganisms, water, soil, environmental conditions, and other factors. Unless these players are part of the rebuilding process, trees will remain as green cover rather than the enchanting, natural, complex ecosystems that they are.

It is argued that planting trees will help store carbon and reduce pollution. It is true that all trees — invasive species and native and non-native species — store carbon, but the other benefits which are critical vary widely depending on the species planted and the location of plantation. If wrong areas are selected for plantation, the natural habitat may get altered, which will cause habitat specialist species to become extinct. This will make the local environment and ecosystem less resilient. A classic example that we witness is the conversion of natural grasslands to wooded areas through tree planting. The Great Indian Bustard, once nominated to be India’s national bird, is now staring at extinction with fewer than 200 individuals. This is because many areas where these large birds thrived have been lost due to tree planting. The Ranibennur Wildlife Sanctuary in central Karnataka, which was designated to conserve this species, is an example of this unscientific thinking. Similarly, the Jayamangali Conservation Reserve, another grassland habitat in Karnataka, hosted wolves. But now there are leopards there as the whole area has been planted with acacia, anjan, eucalyptus and tamarind trees. Other natural habitats such as woodland savanna, laterite grasslands, scrubland, wetlands and rocky outcrops that have evolved to support unique biodiversity have been systematically transformed from ecologically rich habitats into sterile landscapes due to tree planting.

Some of these tree-planting campaigns claim to propagate native species. Native tree species is a very misused terminology in India. Though neem, peepal, banyan, and anjan may be native to India, they are non-native to many parts of the country. We tend to ignore this critical ecological criterion and take up planting of these species in all areas. Planting any kind of native tree species may probably help in urban settings but not in natural habitats.

Overall, it is not a bad idea to plant trees. But the aim should not be to only plant trees; it should be to make tree-planting activities friendly to local biodiversity. If we want to restore forests, we need to first understand systematically the native vegetation and the biodiversity that play a critical role in forming these forests. If we plant a range of locally found indigenous species, biodiversity will make a comeback. There is a rule of thumb in the tree-planting world: One should plant the right tree in the right place. And some add, ‘for the right reason’. We should also monitor and examine the outputs of such tree-planting or restoration initiatives.

Another solution is to let forests come back on their own through protection. This is called

assisted natural regeneration and is cheaper and more effective method. Scientific studies have shown that natural regeneration absorbs 40 times more carbon than plantations and host a lot more biodiversity. But of utmost priority is the task of halting deforestation and protecting existing forests.

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While the government has embarked on the 19,000 crore project of planting trees, a report by the Centre for Science and Environment says that the government has cut the budget for wildlife conservation by 47% between 2018 and 2021. This means reduced support for forests and other habitat protection. We seem to be investing heavily in 'creating' forests while letting our natural forests that have evolved over centuries fade. Is this a sensible act?

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