

PROTECTING FOREST FRINGES

Relevant for: Indian Society | Topic: Urbanization, their problems and their remedies incl. Migration & Smart Cities

India is among the fastest urbanising major countries and forest-rich nations of the world. The current trend of fast-paced, spatial urban expansion is increasing the proximity between forests and the cities. In the next 10 years, this situation is likely to pose a severe sustainability challenge.

In major cities such as Gurugram, Mumbai, Hyderabad, Jaipur and Bengaluru, forests have already faced the brunt of encroachments, roads and highways, local extinction of wildlife, contamination of water bodies, and disturbances originating from the urban neighbourhoods. Across India, many more critical wildlife habitats and biodiversity areas are going to face a direct impact from cities in the near term.

Despite this disconcerting pattern, neither the ongoing urban programmes such as 'Smart Cities', nor the draft of the new Forest Policy, 2018, look ready to tackle this challenge. Urban planners and city administrators have ignored the fact that forests are natural shock-absorbers that provide green relief to our grey cities, shield them from the effects of climate change, and aid in urban issues such as air pollution, scarcity of drinking water, flood control and 'heat islands'. Prioritising forest-city proximity will put the onus on cities to incorporate nature in their design. The question is, where and how will city-forest cooperation kick-start?

Recently notified eco-sensitive zones (ESZ) around protected areas hold the key to the place and the process in this regard. These zones are strips of land outside national parks and wildlife sanctuaries earmarked by the Ministry of Environment for sustainable management. The ESZ committee and its plans fulfil basic conditions to facilitate inter-departmental collaboration of the forest departments, urban bodies and civil society.

However, urbanisation close to forests often means that dense neighbourhoods expand up to the fringe of the forest, as has happened in the Sanjay Gandhi National Park in Mumbai, Bannerghatta in Bengaluru, and the Guindy National Park in Chennai. In the absence of physical buffers and hard fences, therefore, these forests will have to be soft-fenced from unscrupulous development. To create a working ground for soft-fencing, urban masterplans must recognise land use at forest fringes, according to ESZ guidelines. In addition, cities should secure wildlife corridors and 'green belts' that connect urban forests with a wider natural landscape.

Most importantly, urban residents need to create social fences by strongly advocating for forests in their cities. The urban citizenry today aspires for a green, pollution-free and serene living environment. Integrating forests with urban planning and governance provides an opportunity to shape cities that not only cater to citizens, but also have the citizens actively involved in shaping the city's future.

The writer is associated with Social Fencers, an urban forest conservation initiative, and his current research focus is Bannerghatta National Park

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