

# OF LUNGS, TREES AND SIN STOCKS

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

“India, the world’s second largest producer of tobacco, produces about 800 million kg annually.”  
A tobacco farmer in Mysuru. | Photo Credit: M.A. Sriram

The second Global Adult Tobacco Survey estimated that 28.6% of all adults in India used tobacco in 2016-2017, second only to China. The survey said 42.4% of men and 14.2% of women used tobacco — both the smokeless form, i.e. chewing tobacco, and smoked form, i.e. cigarettes and ‘bidis’.

In 1987, the World Health Organization (WHO) marked ‘World No Tobacco Day’ to bring attention to the ill-effects of tobacco. ‘Poisoning our planet’ is the theme for May 31 this year, in an effort to highlight the ill-effects of tobacco on the environment.

In 2021, smoking killed about 8 million people. But tobacco is not just a bane on human health. According to the WHO, 600 million trees are chopped down annually to make cigarettes, 84 million tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions are released into the atmosphere, and 22 billion litres of water are used to make cigarettes. In addition to the environmental costs of production, cigarette butts, packaging, plastic pouches of smokeless tobacco, and electronics and batteries associated with e-cigarettes pollute our environment.

India, the world’s second largest producer of tobacco, produces about 800 million kg annually. Most efforts to counter the tobacco epidemic have been directed at creating awareness about the ill-effects of tobacco. These have borne fruit. Over 90% of adults in India, across strata, identify tobacco as being harmful. Additional gains in overcoming the ill-effects of tobacco are therefore unlikely to come from more awareness campaigns alone. While several campaigns have also dealt with finding alternative livelihoods for tobacco farmers, an issue that sometimes goes unnoticed is deforestation.

About 6 million farmers and 20 million farm labourers work in tobacco farming across 15 States (Central Tobacco Research Institute). Although farming of tobacco only contributes to 1% of GDP as per one study, the direct health expenditure on treating tobacco-related diseases alone accounts for 5.3% of total health spending in India in a year (WHO). Despite this, farming of tobacco cannot be stopped without serious economic consequences and/or social disruption.

Thankfully, there are market-based solutions. The forestry community has devised solutions and instruments to incentivise the reduction of deforestation through the use of carbon credits. With the surge in new commitments to zero carbon from the international commodity sector, companies are putting pressure on their supply chains to transition to sustainable practices and reduce deforestation. Companies like Unilever, Amazon, Nestlé, Alibaba, and Mahindra Group are pledging to cut emissions and are poised to invest an estimated \$50 billion in nature-based solutions such as carbon sinks. This is driving new interest in sourcing from sustainable landscapes and buying high-quality forest carbon credits. The revenue from this is many times higher than the earnings from selling tobacco leaves.

Cigarette companies themselves appear to be changing. In 2016, one of the largest cigarette companies pledged to begin transitioning its customers away from tobacco to smoke-free products. By 2019, it reported it was spending 98% of its research and development budget to back up this goal. Though first met with scepticism, this strategy of transitioning to ‘socially responsible bottom-lines’ is picking up speed. The rise of environmental, social, and governance

(ESG) managers has helped. By looking at exposure to child labour, wasted energy and water, and diversity in management ranks, ESG managers say they have a clearer sense of a company's long-term survival options.

Some companies have shown much greater levels of disclosure than their competitors. These statistics don't necessarily show how good the companies themselves are, but rather how much less harmful they are than they used to be. In a way, these so-called front runners are helping sin stocks get recognition for doing less harm than before by quantifying the pace of change. By transitioning to safer nicotine delivery systems, and moving away from tobacco, cigarette companies are potentially lowering the risk of their customers dying from cancer.

So, all is not grim. While there are problems in the business of tobacco and cigarettes, there are options, solutions and global movements being undertaken by the largest corporate enterprises. Educating potential consumers to not consume tobacco, supporting consumers in their journey to quit, and incentivising industry to help consumers and the planet will protect not just our lungs, but also the air we breathe.

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