

EASTERN GHATS FACE LOSS OF FOREST COVER, ENDEMIC PLANTS

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The Eastern Ghats spread across Odisha, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu, has lost almost 16% of its forest area over a span of 100 years, a recently published study shows.

Researchers from the University of Hyderabad studied historical maps and satellite images from 1920 to 2015 to understand the changes in land use and land cover. The forest cover, which was 43.4% of the total geographical area in 1920, has reduced drastically to 27.5% in 2015. Over the years, about 8% of forest area was converted into agricultural fields, while about 4% converted into scrub or grassland.

They also found that the number of patches of land had increased indicating fragmentation. In 1920 there were about 1,379 patches which kept steadily increasing over the years reaching a whopping number of 9,457 in 2015.

Previous studies have shown that the Eastern Ghats is home to more than 2,600 plant species and this habitat fragmentation and destruction can pose a serious threat to the endemic plants.

“We have sampling points across the four States where we regularly monitor the plants. When we carried out forest map overlay informatics analysis, we found fragmentation in areas where there are several rare, endangered, threatened and endemic species. Best suitable habitats for the plant species have decreased in the Eastern Ghats,” says Reshma M. Ramachandran, Ph.D. scholar at the Centre for Earth, Ocean and Atmospheric Sciences, University of Hyderabad and first author of the paper published in *Ecological Indicators*.

Habitat reduction mainly occurred in the districts of Gajapati (Odisha), Mahbubnagar (Telangana), and also in Nallamalai and Kolli hill ranges.

While agriculture was the main reason for deforestation during the early years, post 1975, mining and other developmental activities such as the construction of dams, roads were the culprits. In 1920, the mining area was only 622 sq.km, and in 2015 it had increased to 962 sq.km.

“The Eastern Ghats are often ignored. Even stakeholders are interested only in the Western Ghats and Himalayan studies. But they need to understand that the Eastern Ghats are also ecologically important. They play an important role in the monsoon break of both North-East and South-West Monsoon,” says Dr. Parth Sarathi Roy from Centre for Earth, Ocean and Atmospheric Sciences, University of Hyderabad. “There are also many tribal communities in this region and the government needs to shift its focus and fund more studies and monitoring programmes in this region.”

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