

SHADES OF GREEN

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

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On Monday, Prime Minister [Narendra Modi](#) announced that India will scale up its ambition to restore degraded land. PM Modi's announcement, at the ongoing 14th Conference of Parties (CoP) of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) in Greater Noida, is significant from the standpoint of the country's global environmental commitments. The country will now restore 26 million hectares by 2030, five million hectares more than what it had pledged at the Paris Climate Change Meet in 2015. Monday's announcement is also salutary given the growing crisis of desertification. According to ISRO's Desertification and Land Degradation Atlas, nearly 30 per cent of land in the country is degraded. This, PM Modi said, "would be reversed by adopting a landscape-restoration approach". It will require the environment ministry to shift focus from its plantation-oriented afforestation schemes and recognise the importance of ecosystem services of land and forests such as watershed management, biodiversity conservation and improving soil health.

PM Modi also spoke of the increase in the country's green cover in the past year. In fact, over the past two decades, the Dehradun-based Forest Survey of India (FSI) has reported a consistent increase in the country's forested area. But the agency hasn't convincingly answered a question: How is it that India's forests have not been impacted by the relentless pressure on land? This paradox can be ascribed to a methodological problem with the FSI's audits. The agency uses satellite images to identify green cover as forest, and does not discriminate between natural forests and plantations. Addressing the asymmetry between India's green cover and land degradation data is, however, not just an academic matter. Several studies have shown the limitations of monoculture plantations in sequestering GHG emissions. A study published in the journal *Science* in 2016 found that the capacity of the green areas in Europe to absorb carbon dioxide has come down significantly despite recording an increase in such areas over the past 250 years.

Last month, a report of the IPCC elucidated the links between global warming and land degradation. Climate change "not only exacerbates many of the well-acknowledged land degradation processes", but it "becomes a dominant pressure that introduces novel degradation pathways in ... ecosystems," it said. PM Modi's announcement at the UNCCD meet signals the country's intent to meet this challenge. India's environment establishment now needs to re-evaluate the methods to measure the country's green cover.

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