

Aravalis a forest? Survey to decide

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Gurgaon: In order to put an end to the debate over the ecological status of the Aravalis and its foothills once and for all, the state forest department is carrying out the first-ever satellite base mapping of the entire range. Officials said the activity will be over in the next three months and once completed, it will demarcate the forest areas of the Aravalis.

Till now, the forest department does not have a proper map of the Aravalis and its foothills, due to which it is at loggerheads with the revenue department over its status. A number of real estate projects has been approved in this area, which has emerged as the biggest threat to the fragile ecosystem of the exploited hill ranges. Conservator of forests (Gurgaon circle) MD Sinha said that mapping is already done in Rewari, Faridabad, Mahendragarh and Palwal and work in Gurgaon and Mewat is in advance stage. "More than 50% of work is done and the remaining will be completed in the next three months. The mapping will cover entire southern Haryana," he told TOI on Thursday.

A total of 1.25 lakh hectares of land fall under the Aravalis and its foothills in south Haryana. Out of this 21,000 hectares of land is notified under sections 4 and 5 of the Punjab Land Preservation Act, thus prohibiting any kind of non-forest activity in such land. Around 4,000 hectares of land is block forest; 20,000 hectares of land comes under the Aravali project area and the remaining land is part of the Aravali hills and its foothills. The mapping will classify the land in six different categories - land under sections 4, 5 of PLPA Act, reserve forest (if any), Aravali plantation, overlapping of Aravali plantation and PLPA land, Aravali Hills and foothills, he said. "After completion of mapping, if there is any incident of encroachment, then officials can identify the spot and through satellite image can find out the classification of land," said Sinha, adding that large parts of the Aravalis is under private ownership and they carry out construction on the pretext that the land was never under forest. He added, "With this map, we can check whether there was forest on the part of land earlier or not."

Officials said this mapping will help in the demarcation of the natural conservation zones (NCZ) as it will be very easy to find out the ecological status of land and its past history. The state government is currently carrying out ground surveys of NCZs in each district of NCR to delineate forests, recharge zones, major water bodies and river beds. Forest cover constitutes just 3.5% of land in Haryana.

NCZ is the peripheral area of the Aravalis or other forest areas and demarcation of NCZ is under progress to prohibit any construction activities in this area. NCZ demarcation is to be done for protection of the forest and greenery. With the demarcation of NCZ, this area will become part of the forest.

Sinha also said that large parts of the foothills of the Aravali are encroached in Gurgaon and Faridabad causing depletion of groundwater level. "Foothills are major water recharge zone, so along with Aravalis, we also need to preserve the foothills," he said.