Global forests decline by 3% since 1990

The world has lost nearly three percent of its forests since 1990, an area proportionate to the size of South Africa. However, the annual rate of net forest loss has reduced from 7.3 M ha y^{-1} in the 1990s to 3.3 M ha y^{-1} between 2010 and 2015. This may be due to implementation of strong conservation measures in the past decade. It should be also noted that forest loss occurs more quickly in some of the poor-income countries.

Recently, the UN has released its report on Global Forest Resources Assessment (GFRA) 2015. Though there is a positive sign as the report reveals that the pace of forest loss has slowed, the impact of damage caused during the last 25 still persists. The key finding is that the world's total forest area has declined by three per cent between 1990 and 2015, accounting for a loss of 129 million ha. Forestry expert at the University of Melbourne Professor Rod Keenan has been involved with the GFRA since 2003. For the 2015 Assessment, he headed a team of academics analysing the GFRA data for the UN's Food and Agriculture Organisation. He opined that these are not good numbers in changing climatic conditions.

Destruction of a rainforest in Madagascar

Another important thing to be noted is that the total loss of world's natural forest stood at 6% while the worst is for those in tropics with a loss rate of 20%. "We really need to be increasing forest area across all domains to provide for the forest benefits and services of a growing population. So there is more work to do", said Keenan. Agricultural land development, by large and small scale producers, is believed to be the main driver behind the decreases, with Brazil, Indonesia and Nigeria recording the biggest losses over the past five years.

Also there are some of positive signs indicated by the report. While the annual rate of net forest loss in the 1990s stood at 7.3 million hectares, it has almost halved to 3.3 million hectares between 2010 and 2015. "Reduction in loss is a good thing, but stringent policy measures must be taken to ensure this trend sustained," Professor Keenan added. He believes this should include regulations to stop forest conversion, funding for better forest management and incentives to increase forest area. Brazil and Indonesia, both among the highest deforestation offenders, have significantly improved their ways -- with Brazil's current net loss rate 40 per cent lower than in the 1990s. Indonesia is also losing forested area at a rate two-thirds slower than it did between 1990 and 2000.

The study indicated that forest is being more rapidly lost in some of the poorest countries, including India, Vietnam and Ghana. "In low-income countries with high forest cover, forests are being cleared for direct subsistence by individuals and families and large scale agriculture for broader economic development," he said. "Some have policies and regulations to protect forests, but they do not have the capacity and resources to implement them." In Australia, conservation efforts are beginning to have an impact as the country has recorded a net gain of 1.5 million hectares of forested land over the past five years, despite an overall fall from 128.5 million hectares in 1990 to 124.7 million hectares in 2015.

Key findings and facts of GFRA are:

- In 2015, total forest cover is 3,999 m ha globally (or 31 per cent of global land)
- Since 1990, there has been a loss of 3% of total forest area, 6% of total natural forested area and 10% decrease in tropical forests
- The average rate of loss has halved from 7.3 m ha in the 1990s, to 3.3 m ha between 2010 and 2015
- Decline in natural forests has been offset by 66 % rise in planted forest, from 168 m ha to 278 m ha
- Losses occur more rapidly in some of the lowest-income countries

Source: http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2015/09/150914102748.htm