

India lost original forests 70 times Delhi's area in 14 years

Kumar Sambhav Shrivastava, Hindustan Times, New Delhi

Updated: Jul 17, 2015



Records show the country may have lost close to 10.6 million hectares, or about 70 times Delhi's geographical area, of original forests between that year and 2013. (HT Photo/ K Sasi)

Is India's forest cover increasing? Or is it shrinking?

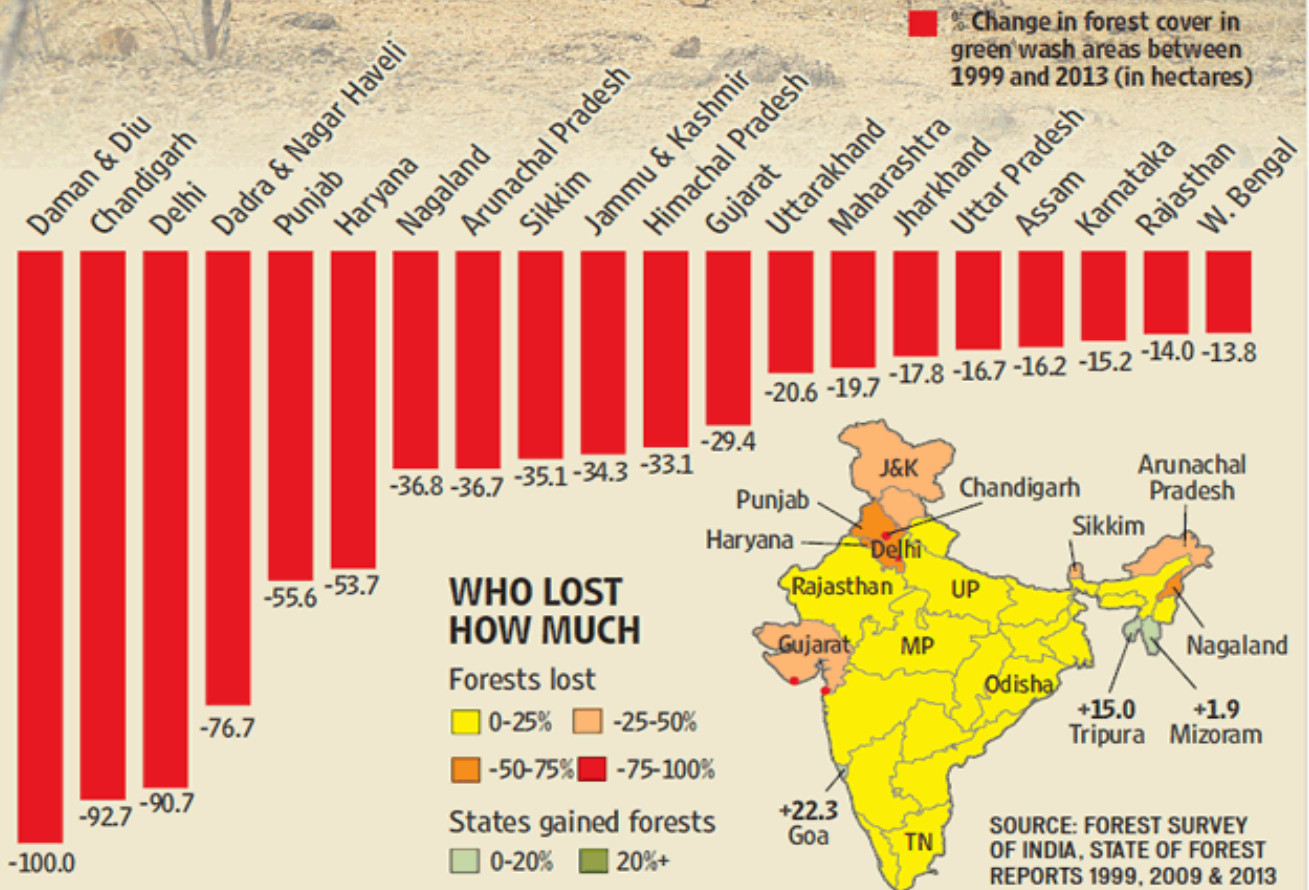
The government claims a steady increase in the country's forest turf since 1999. But official data indicate it may be missing the woods for the trees. Records show the country may have lost close to 10.6 million hectares, or about 70 times Delhi's geographical area, of original forests between that year and 2013. This is more than three times the reported increase in the nation's forest cover in this period and 15% of India's existing green cover.

According to the biennial state of forest reports (SFRs) from the ministry of environment, forest

and climate change (MoEFCC), forest cover in the country went up by 3.3 million hectares between 1999 and 2013. The Centre and states have been using the numbers from these reports, the latest released last year, to pat themselves on the back for "stabilising" the country's forest cover despite huge demand for land from industry and growing need for food, fodder and timber. The stated spread of forest cover, however, is mostly due to proliferation of plantations outside forest areas, masking a massive deforestation in the natural forests.

JUNGLE WOES

Despite an increase in green cover, the loss of original forests has increased exponentially



The disparity came to light from the analyses of the data and the methodology adopted in the past few years by the Forest Survey of India (FSI), the nodal agency of the government that maps forest cover. Due to technical limitations till 1999, the FSI calculated forest cover only over the traditional or legally notified forest areas. Because there are no digital maps of notified forests in the country, FSI used the regions marked as green patches, also known as “green wash areas”, in the government’s Survey of India (SOI) topographic sheets as a proxy to such forests. Green wash areas represent the forest territories in the country at the time of the SOI studies carried out till the 1980s. FSI started digital interpretation of satellite

images with improved resolution from 2001. With this, it began estimating forest cover for the entire country without differentiating between the notified forests and the plantations outside. It now counts all land, irrespective of its ownership, with more than 10% canopy cover over an area of more than one hectare as “forest cover”, which now includes all plantations like tea and coffee gardens as well as orchards apart from traditional forests. Estimated through this method, India’s forest cover showed a substantial growth over the years. But forestry analysts criticised the methodology as it did not give the idea of how our natural forests were faring.

Responding to this criticism, the FSI digitised the Survey of India topo-sheets and estimated the forest cover in green wash areas afresh in the SFR 2013. As per the report, out of the total 69.8-million-hectare forest cover in the country, 53.08 million hectares lie in green wash areas. While the 2013 report does not make any reference to the pre-2001 data on forest cover in green wash regions, SFR 2009 contains the forest cover data for the period till 1999 revised for the technological advancements in methodology to make it comparable with the latest figures. According to the 2009 report, forest cover in green wash areas in 1999 was about 63.66 million hectares. This indicates a deforestation of at least 10.58 million hectares in original forests over 14 years. Experts say while any increase in green cover is welcome, the massive loss of original forests in the country should be a cause for concern.

Source: <http://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/india-lost-original-forests-70-times-delhis-area-in-14-yrs/article1-1370093.aspx>