

India's forest cover has gone up but biodiversity is on a downward spiral, expert says

Pratiksha Ramkumar, TNN | Sep 1, 2015,



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Q: How extensive is the country's forest cover? Have there been any significant changes in the green cover in the past few decades?

A: It might come as a surprise that forest cover in the country has increased significantly in the last three decades. According to the Forest Survey of India, the country now has 6,80,000sqkm of forest area compared to the 6,40,000sqkm

recorded in 1987. In the last three decades, the composition of forest area in the country has increased from 17% in 1987 to 24% in 2012. This is mainly due to the implementation of the Forest Conservation Act of 1980. The act put in place stringent measures like banning use of forest land for non-forestry purposes without prior government approval.

Q: If this is the scenario, why are hundreds of plant species endangered?

A: Though green cover in the country is increasing, biodiversity is reducing rapidly. Hundreds of medicinal plants are entering the endangered category every day, due to increasing human interference like rampant urbanization close to forests, construction activities and even cattle grazing. Mass plucking of medicinal plants by traditional medicinal practitioners is also a concern since the demand for native medicines have gone up. According to a recent finding by the Botanical Survey of India, 93% of the 350 major medicinal plants used by humans are endangered.

Q: What is the ideal method to reap herbs and where do these medicinal practitioners go wrong?

A: People involved in gathering herbs often remove the entire plant along with its roots. They don't realize that if they leave the root behind, the plant survives and produces more herbs. Often, they pluck the root without waiting for the plant to mature and drop seeds.

Q: Is the government taking measures to control rapid disappearance of traditional source of medicines?

A: The government is now allotting funds to all states for research, documentation and preservation of medicinal plants. They are also providing incentives to people growing medicinal plants and forest species. Though these initiatives are in the initial stages, they can be quite effective in the long run, because of the success we have achieved with the wood industry. Due to our timber farming activities, 50% of the industry's raw material requirements are now provided from growing timber outside forests. We have managed to farm plywood, pulpwood and wood for the construction industry, reducing the pressure on forests.

Q: But Ayurveda practitioners believe that medicinal plants or forest species farmed outside their natural habitat are not as effective or potent?

A: It is true that the plant may not be as potent when grown outside its natural habitat. But this could be because we use chemical fertilizers and soil conditions

may not be as good. The soil condition is much better in forest areas.

Q: Due to changes in environment conditions and climate are we seeing genetic changes in forest species of plants and trees?

A: The genetic nature of plants has not changed but some of their characteristics have changed. This is natural because plants reproduce due to cross pollinations, so changes and variations will occur. However, changes in composition of the species are not visible yet. Small changes though can be seen. For example, a long time ago, Banyan and Peepul trees used to gain massive girth and heights. These tree species survive and grow even today, but they are not as tall. We have not researched or found reasons behind this yet.

Source:

<http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/home/environment/Indias-forest-cover-has-gone-up-but-biodiversity-is-on-a-downward-spiral-expert-says/articleshow/48755067.cms>