

Wakeup Call: Too Precious to Lose; The Forest



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Opinion

The world celebrates many international days in third week of March like, 20th March, as World Sparrow Day; 21st March, as World Forestry day; 22nd March, as World Water Day and 23rd March, as World Meteorological Day. Above all, 5th June is celebrated as World Environment day. In one way or other these days are linked to the natural resources and the human life. Are these days becoming symbolic and irrelevant under the shadow of development and one species greed? The universe is not human-centric. Every life form has a role to play. To bridge this, forest has to stay on this planet.

Among above, I prefer to share my views on the "forest". The earth planet is going through a transitional phase of climate change and because of this, now the entire world has become one "Nation theory" and national boundaries have become irrelevant. In this connection it would be appropriate to discuss the scenario of forest on the planet as a whole and then to touch my country followed by the State i.e. Karnataka.

Forests provide many important goods, such as timber, fuelwood, minor forest produce, ecoservices, tourism and so many others. It also supply/source of essential services like water filtering, control of water runoff, protect and conservation of soil, regulate climates, store nutrients, carbon sinks and provide habitat for countless animal species and space for quality recreation. There are more than 1.6 billion needy people in the world who are used to get all the goods for their survival.

The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations General Assembly celebrates 21st March as an International Day of Forest since 2012 with a specific theme each year. This year, the day was celebrated with the theme of Forest and Biodiversity-Too precious to lose. The day is celebrated to raise awareness of the importance of all types of forest.

31% of the world's land surface is covered by forest which is just over 4 billion hectares. This is down from the pre-industrial

area of 5.9 billion hectares. According to data from the Food and Agriculture Organization, deforestation was at its highest rate in the 1990s, when each year the world lost an average of 16 million hectares of forest per year roughly the size of the less than Karnataka. The global net forest loss between 2000 and 2010 was about 5.2 Million hectares per year.

It is a well-known fact that natural forest cannot be regenerated in the same form. However, affords are being made to develop the barren / degraded areas through planting. Planted forests now cover about 264 million hectares, comprising nearly 7 percent of total forest area. Plantations now have the potential to produce an estimated 1.2 billion cubic meters of industrial wood each year.

Forests are primarily threatened by land clearing for agriculture, pasture and by harvesting wood for fuel or industrial uses. The increasing population have further mounted the pressure on the forest encroachments and other similar land use projects. Brazil has lost 55 million hectares since 1990. Large scale mining also plays big role in deforestation in Brazil and other countries including India. Home to the Amazon rainforest, Brazil contains 13 percent of the world's forested area, second only to Russia's 20 percent.

Africa also suffers from extensive deforestation, having lost about 34 million hectares from 2000 to 2010. Another large driver of deforestation in Indonesia is palm oil production, the country accounts for almost half of the global output of this product. The world community has to take note of it. Mexico is another country where the government is taking on deforestation. In the 1990s Mexico had the seventh highest rate of deforestation in the world. But recently the country has reduced the deforestation almost half of the deforestation done during 1990s.

Wildfire / bushfire / forest fire is also one of the major factors for degradation of forest. The big and frequent fires in Brazil, Australia, Canada, USA, India and Indonesia are responsible for degradation of large area of forest. Millions of hectares have

been lost due to fire every year. The forest fire is a major factor for climate change due to large production of CO₂ and other greenhouse gases. It also generates heat and result in temperature increase which have direct impact on the melting of glaciers and also the ice in Antarctica/Arctica. Canada's forest has been greatly affected with forest fire, in conjunction with insect outbreaks. These disturbances released large amounts of carbon to the atmosphere, possibly transforming Canada's boreal forests from a carbon sink, to a carbon source. Canada's 310 million hectares of forest-the third most of any country will have large implications for future climate change.

The countries like USA, China, Australia, and India have made a substantial contribution for raising plantation on the earth. But this contribution has not copped with the deforestation going on the planet. Russia is the Country having the largest forest cover which is about 45.40% of its land. While Qatar, San Marino, Greenland have no forest. The Amazon is the largest rain forest covers approximately 2.2 Million square miles. About 10% of the world species of plants and animals are found in this forest. This is also most important rain forest for climate stabilization and does have effect on Monsoon in India and other countries.

We can contribute in protection of forest by reducing consumption of paper and wood products, use of recycling paper, reclaiming wood, legally sourcing wood from sustainable plantations, finding substitutes for firewood and stabilizing population by accelerating the shift to smaller families. Farm forestry/ social forestry may play a major role in checking the forest depletion. This is how this present generation can help to protect forests for future generations. Regarding India, according to the 2019 report of Forest Survey of India, the total forest cover of the country is 71.23 lakhs ha (21.67 percent of India's total geographical area). Regarding to State of Karnataka, the seventh largest State of the country, with a geographical area of 191.79 lakhs ha accounts for 5.83% of the geographical area of the country. Out of this, forest area is 43.38 lakhs ha (22%). The major part of the forest falls in Western Ghats.

Out of total forest area, wildlife protected area is about 10.89 lakhs ha. (25.11%). The forest of the Western Ghats is one of the mega Biodiversity hotspots of the 35 biodiversity mega hotspots of the world. The forest in Karnataka makes the heart of the Western Ghats. It is also a part of Nilgiris biosphere. The State can be divided into two distinct physiographic regions viz the 'Malanda' or hilly region comprising Western Ghats and 'Maidan' or plains comprising the inland plateau of varying heights. The Western Ghats, which has an exceptionally high level of biological diversity and endemism, covers about 60% of forest area of the State. East flowing rivers in Karnataka mainly Cauvery & Krishna along with its tributaries drain into Bay of Bengal and west flowing rivers mainly Sharavathi, Kali and Netravati drain into Arabian Sea.

The Karnataka state comprises of five National Parks, 33 Wildlife Sanctuaries, 15 Conservation Reserves and one Community Reserve constitute the Protected Area network of the State covering 5.33% of its geographical area. Karnataka supports about 10% of total tiger population and 25% of elephant population of the country.

The forest shall be considered as one of the main sources for ecosystem services wherein people get benefits from ecosystems. Healthy forest ecosystems are ecological life-support systems. Forests provide a full suite of goods and services that are vital to human health and livelihood.

The ecosystem services may be

- a. provisional service to provide food, water, fuel, fibre, and other goods
- b. Regulating Services such as climate, water, and disease regulation as well as pollination
- c. Supporting Services such as soil formation, nutrient cycling
- d. Cultural Services such as educational, aesthetic, and cultural heritage values as well as recreation and tourism. The value of these services shall be quantified and may be taken as part of Gross Domestic Product.

Many of these goods and services are traditionally viewed as free benefits to society, or "public goods" like, wildlife habitat and biodiversity, watershed services, carbon storage, and scenic landscapes. These natural assets are traditionally absent from society's balance sheet; their critical contributions are often overlooked in public, corporate, and individual decision-making. To conserve and protect the forest and wildlife, there are various Laws to regulate by the Government machinery. Due to shortage of manpower, political intervention and inadequate infrastructure and increasing population, it is not possible to cope-up with various threats to forests. Explosion in human population made the forest non sustainable. The effect is more in developing countries like India. Hence, there is immediate need to control the human population growth to save the forest and Earth planet as a hole.

Mr. John Vidal an environment editor has very recently observed that distraction of habitat and loss of biodiversity are creating the perfect conditions for diseases like Ebola, HIV, Bird flu, Nipah, Zika and COVID-19. All these pathogens are serious reasons to death of human population and others. I will conclude my views on forest stating that Indian Constitution mandates to every citizen under article 51 A (g) the duties to protect and improve the natural environment including forests, lakes, rivers and wildlife, and to have compassion for living creatures. We should respect and adopt these duties in our life to protect the Earth planet.



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