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"Greening India" but losing forests

Praveen Bhargav

Planting trees or raising plantations doesnot recover lost habitats or create pristine natural forests. It is, therefore, no antidoteto habitat fragmentation.

Forests are among the first casualties as human populations explode. An insatiable thirst for land has shrunk India's forest cover alarmingly. It is estimated that between 1950 and 1980, around 50 lakh hectares of forestland was diverted for non-forestry activities. Consequently, forest cover shrunk to around 19 per cent of the country's land area as against the national goal of 33 per cent. Yet forestlands continue to be diverted for non-forestry purposes in an ad hoc manner.

Responding to the urgent need to stop the depletion in the face of diminishing political will, the Supreme Court is now enforcing compulsory levies on mining, power and other developmental projects that gobble up natural forests and intrude into wildlife habitats. A sum of Rs. 5,000 crore thus collected is now lying in a corpus fund with the Compensatory Afforestation Fund Management and Planning Authority (CAMPA). The fund comprises monies collected for compensatory afforestation as mandated by the Forest Conservation Act and from realisation of the Net Present Value (NPV), a levy based on valuation of the forestland diverted for non-forestry activities. The Ministry of Environment and Forests (MoEF), for the moment, is the custodian of this huge corpus.

And what does the MoEF propose to do with it? The plan seems to be to await proposals from State governments for compensatory afforestation projects. As the name implies, compensatory afforestation is an attempt to make up for the loss of natural forests in one area by planting trees in another area. Unfortunately, this has often led to situations in which a pristine natural forest is destroyed, say, for a mining project, and on nearby natural grassland, which should have been left alone, are planted useless exotic species such as acacia, eucalyptus and casuarina. The net result is the destruction of two natural habitats.

While this kind of 'afforestation' is in itself disastrous, the money lying with CAMPA is generating other fanciful ideas. One is to transfer this huge fund to the National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development and distribute it to people who will then ostensibly plant saplings that would hopefully grow into mature trees — a sure way of frittering away the funds and having virtually nothing to show for it.

Consolidate shrinking forests

Greening India, compensatory afforestation, increasing forest cover — all these may be perceived by citizens as important and necessary. Political leaders too are quick to lap up simplistic solutions that claim to solve the problem of shrinking forest cover. But do these populist methods and solutions actually help? Unfortunately, they do not.

It is scientifically established that fragmentation or shrinking of forests into smaller patches honeycombed with human settlements, highways, dams, mines or developmental projects is the most serious threat to biodiversity and forest conservation. When a large block of forest gets fragmented, the edges of all the bits come into contact with human activities, resulting in degradation of the entire forest. With continuity of forested landscapes and corridors getting disrupted, populations of single species and the composition of entire animal communities are affected. Rare interior forest species are replaced with common, adaptable 'trash' species of plants and animals.

Habitat fragmentation has other consequences at more practical levels. Fragmentation also facilitates intensive exploitation of forest produce and poaching of wildlife, thanks to easier access to previously remote, interior forest areas. Finally, fragmentation aggravates human-wildlife conflicts that are increasing across the country. Competing with humans for the same food sources, tigers and leopards kill cattle and wolves, and lift children, and elephants raid paddy fields and farms. In such conflicts, wildlife inevitably loses out.

Fragmentation and its deleterious consequences have already shrunk the range and distribution of large mammal species such as tigers and lion-tailed macaques to less than five per cent of their former range in India. Other species have suffered even more. We lost the cheetah and are left with practically a single surviving population of the Asiatic lion and the rhinoceros.

These consequences of fragmentation cannot be brushed aside as idle speculation. High-resolution satellite imagery along with ecological surveys can objectively monitor the negative impacts. Planting trees or raising plantations does not recover lost habitats or create pristine natural forests. It is, therefore, no antidote to habitat fragmentation.

The need of the hour is to prevent fragmentation and consolidate the already fragmented natural forests by eliminating or reducing human intrusions. This will ensure that large forested landscapes which still exist conserve the nation's incredible biodiversity wealth for the present and future generations.

Unfortunately, this approach is nowhere in evidence in the planning and decision-making process of the MoEF. This is starkly reflected in the fact that proposals for diversion of forestland are not even required to indicate whether a development project will fragment a large forest block. The Ministry in New Delhi continues to permit development projects and sanction in-situ grants of forestland without this piece of crucial data.

From the MoEF’s perspective, “Greening India” through a pit-and-plant approach is far more rewarding. It not only presents an opportunity to share the huge funds accumulated under the compensatory afforestation stream with States for lucrative “afforestation” projects but also legitimises the continued sanctioning of projects within forest areas in an ad hoc manner using ‘compensatory afforestation’ as a fig leaf. This must be stopped immediately.

De-fragment large blocks

With over a billion people and an economy growing at eight per cent, some amount of forest loss is inevitable. To mitigate its impact, we must innovate radically to de-fragment and consolidate large blocks of forests and facilitate natural recovery through protection measures. While addressing this, the knotty issue of relocating people living deep within pristine forest areas cannot be swept under leaf litter. Ecologically robust and socially just solutions that are site-specific must be crafted with care and offered to the people.

The Tiger Task Force constituted by the Prime Minister has recommended that ‘inviolable’ areas are required for maintaining breeding tiger populations. It has also estimated that relocating around 65, 000 families from reserves would cost the government Rs. 1,663 crore at Rs. 2.5 lakh compensation for each family. The Rs. 5,000-crore corpus can surely provide the much-needed budgetary support to ensure proper redress of past injustices meted out to forest dwellers. This offers an additional bonus too. Voluntarily relocating people from remote interiors to areas where socio-economic services exist will ensure significant savings to the exchequer by eliminating the need to build new roads, bridges, power lines and communication infrastructure and provide health services — all of which have the potential to cause more fragmentation.

Therefore, using such a huge fund transparently for addressing the genuine resettlement demands of people marooned inside critical wildlife habitat would be extremely valuable. This would be a major decision which requires the Prime Minister’s urgent intervention. Flawed policies and bureaucratic mindsets that impede the devolution of this corpus to State governments for resettlement and consolidation must be changed.

Apart from this, the government must accept that the present system of afforestation through artificial plantations (other than natural recovery) does not adequately compensate the loss of dense forests. With emerging challenges triggered by climate change, effective sequestration of carbon to mitigate the impact is best achieved through protection of natural old-growth forests. This will also rake in much higher carbon credits under the Kyoto Protocol as valuations for artificial plantations are far lower.

We are at a critical moment in India's fight to achieve ecological security while ensuring economic and social progress. Myopic ideas that promote failed pit-and-plant projects must be jettisoned. It would be a monumental folly if we allow Rs. 5,000 crore to be squandered on digging pits and buying polythene bags for raising saplings.

The government must heed scientific advice on this crucial issue. The funds lying with CAMPA present a great prospect to de-fragment the last remaining patches of old-growth natural forests. India just cannot afford to lose this fantastic opportunity to implement a win-win solution that not only consolidates critical wildlife habitats but also delivers social justice to disenfranchised forest communities.

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