

Encroachment killing forest in the state



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Vana Mahotsav was started in India in 1950. Keeping in mind the shared inter linkages between forestry and agriculture, the then Union Minister of Agriculture KM Munshi, embarked upon this idea to create awareness on conservation of forests and plantation of trees among masses of this largely agricultural country. However, in recent times the underlying objective behind celebration of this weeklong festival seemed to have lost its relevance. Without proper conservation of forests, simply growing trees cannot be a substitute for altering shared habitats. Forests perform critical ecological functions. In cities they are important green spaces supporting a variety of life including birds and animals and water recharge.

Shrinking of dense forest cover has led to the crisis of wildlife management in the state. Protected areas that include the national parks and wildlife sanctuaries and reserve forests (RF) have suffered extensively over the years. Reserve forests have now being pooled with exotic tree plantations such as rubber or Teak plantations which have very limited value for endangered biodiversity. The Assam Project on Forestry and Biodiversity Conservation: Feasibility report states that apart from carbon sequestration, logging will progressively be implemented. There are also plans for new fuel-wood plantation. Converting chunks of natural forests into monoculture industrial plantations would devastate local ecosystems. This is indeed scary because the natural eco-systems are complex and sensitive, where each species has a role and is symbiotically dependent on other species. Removing 95-98% of species for growing 1-2 species may result in the fast degradation of the delicate ecosystem,, this was stated in a press release signed by Mubina Akhtar, secretary Kaziranga Wildlife Society, Moloy Barua, president Early Birds and Nitul Sibnath, working president of Aranya Suraksha Samity. The leading nature organizations of the state jointly addressed a press meet at the Guwahati Press Club on Monday expressing concern over the prevailing state of affairs in the management of forest and wildlife in the state.

This was stated in a press release by Kaziranga Wildlife Society on Monday "While RFs constitute 66.58 per cent of the State's total classified forest cover, un-classed forests constitute 33.42 per cent of the state's total forest area. Unfortunately, a staggering 3,396 sq km of the 300 plus RFs across the State is under encroachment officially."

- More than four lakh people have settled illegally inside 20 wildlife sanctuaries and 271 Reserved Forests.
- In Sonitpur district alone 892 sq km of forested area is under encroachment.

- About 782 hectares of the 78.64 sq km Amchang Wildlife Sanctuary is under encroachment.
- The 220 sq km Sonai-Rupai Wildlife Sanctuary has lost over 85 sq km of its forest area to encroachers.
- Seven RFs of Kamrup –Garbhanga, Hengerabari, South Sarania, Gotanagar, Jalukbari, Kalapahar and Fatasil are under large-scale encroachment posing grave threat to the urban biodiversity. About 80 per cent of the 70 hectare Kalapahar RF has almost been cleared.
- Organized encroachment has threatened to wipe away the Manas Reserve Forest, to the west of the newly created first addition of Manas National Park. It has been alleged by local environment groups that not less than an acre of the forest land has been cleared each day. Encroachment has been intensified in the RF since the last one year. Destruction of this important forest patch between the river Aie and the river Bhur has reached such an alarming proportion that it has been feared that the whole RF may vanish by next year unless the BTC administration curb this menace with strong hands. About 53 villages sprang up inside the Manas National Park over the last 23 years. Forest areas under Chirang, Kolmou and the Kuklung Range have declined drastically. Along with encroachment, illegal logging and poaching continue in the National Park.

The release further stated that "rapid decline in forest cover is not only going to seriously impact biodiversity but also stands to impact climatic conditions with irreversible catastrophic consequences. We demand the State government—if at all it is serious of protecting what is left of our forests--to act tough on illegal settlers and ensure that there is no fresh encroachment on forest land."

Deepor Beel

Deepor, as the very name suggests, is a traditional refuge of the elephant and has been protected as a wildlife sanctuary. Continuous encroachment has already reduced this once 4,000 hectare (ha) wetland shrunk into less than 500 ha area! It has been reported that a high level meeting chaired by the state Chief Minister recently has come up with plans of constricting the protected area boundaries of the Sanctuary to its half for tourism-related activities. The sanctuary, in order to remain alive and perform some definite ecosystem services, needs more a conservational approach.

The Railways during a submission before a Bench of the National Green Tribunal, has stated that there were consultations between the Forest Department and the Railways at the Ministry level to evolve a solution on the ways to meet the expenditure for construction of a tunnel to lay the rail tracks over the Deepor Beel stretch on the forest land as a long-term solution for free movement of the elephants. If the scheme materializes then there would be more shrinkage to the wetland. In such a situation it is expected of the state government not to go with projects that may further shrink the area of the wildlife sanctuary protected for the mega faunas.

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Assam Times Staff. editor@assamtimes.org

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