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More than 1.5 lakh acres of forest land in Western Ghats encroached upon in two decades

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A report released by the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) of India on the preservation of wildlife habitats in the Western Ghats revealed that more than 1 lakh acres of forest area had been encroached upon in the past two decades.

The report titled "Administration of National Parks and Wildlife Sanctuaries in Karnataka" pointed out that unbridled developmental activities in areas lying on the periphery of the forests had had a negative impact on wildlife. The report, which was released on Wednesday, is the result of an audit carried out over five years (2011-'16), covering 14 national parks and wildlife sanctuaries in the Western Ghats-Nilgiri biosphere reserve region. The audit was carried out to study the impact of human intrusion into

wildlife habitats, and the measures that could be taken to mitigate the damage.

Accountant general (economic and revenue sector audit) for Karnataka BK Mukherjee said, "In and around six protected areas, 51 resorts and hotels besides 50 homestays are operating. Of these, 44 resorts/ hotels and 15 homestays do not have the necessary permission from the forest department, and four resorts are located in elephant corridors."

One of the most serious findings of the audit was that encroachment of forest area had nearly quadrupled in the past two decades - from 42,518 acres in 1995 to 2,04,442 acres in 2014. Moreover, 9,254 acres had been encroached upon in the 14 protected areas that were surveyed as on March 2016. The report indicated that just 1,384 cases had been filed against such violations. Although an action plan was submitted to the Karnataka High Court, wherein the forest department stated that 1,041 acres of forests would be recovered, just 469 acres had been rid of encroachments.

In what is being dubbed a first-of-its-kind report, the CAG has come up with a separate report on protected habitats. "We decided to audit protected areas in the Western Ghats since they are biodiversity hotspots. These are being threatened by development activities. Mini hydroelectric projects have affected the flow of water, disrupting the migratory path of animals. Unfortunately, the forest department has not undertaken any periodic study on the extent of the impact that encroachments have the forest areas," Mukherjee added.

He said that, CAG had also tied up with the Indian Institute of Science (IISc) to carry out a scientific analysis.

Spatial mapping of the Western Ghats indicated that the area of the evergreen and semi-evergreen forests had decreased by 75,635 hectares in the past two decades. Daneli, Bandipur, Kudremukh, Brahmagiri are among the forest areas that are being threatened by agricultural activities.

Corridors ignored

Heightened human activity around forest areas has also resulted in an increase in cases of human-animal conflict. The report also attributes the rise in such conflicts to the mismanagement of protected areas by the forest department. Although the forest department identified five corridors in order to preserve the biodiversity of the Western Ghats-Nilgiri Biosphere region more than a decade ago, the idea has not been realised. The report has suggested the need for corridors connecting forests to prevent cases of human-animal conflict.

Under assessment of forest fires

Study of the forest fires at Bandipur in 2012 and Nagarahole in 2014 revealed that there were discrepancies in the burnt area reported by the respective forest divisions, and the actual extent of damage. For instance, at the Nagarahole Tiger Reserve in 2014, an initial report submitted by divisional forest officers stated that 60 hectares had been damaged. However, a later survey showed that it was 179 hectares. A satellite based assessment subsequently indicated that 172 hectares had sustained damage.

While the forest department figures indicated that 50 wild animals had fallen prey to road-kills between 2011 and '16 in the 14 protected areas, this stood in sharp contrast to the fact that a 45 day monitoring by the Kudremukh Wildlife Division alone indicated 1,338 road-kills!