

Kerala is fast losing its forest cover: What are we doing about it?

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The monsoon is just round the corner, but the heat and drought has been extreme in our State this summer, leaving many a Keralite wondering whether they are indeed living in the supposedly lush and 'green-covered' God's Own Country after all.

And the truth is, no, we aren't, anymore. As per a new study conducted by the Indian Institute of Science (IISc), our forest cover is eroding at a dangerous pace, and it is one of the prime reasons why Kerala has been pushed to intense drought, unlike in the past, this time. The study, which compares remote sensing data from 1973 till December 2016, reveals that Kerala has lost about 9,06, 440 hectares of forest land in the period!

In today's article, Kochi Times analyses what is it that we are doing to

deplete our precious forest cover, what needs to be done on a war-footing and the challenges involved.

'Plantations can never be a substitute for natural forests'

Munnar recently made national headlines when it was revealed that several hectares of its forest land have been lost to illegal encroachments. And that constitutes the primary reason for the depleting forest cover — land encroachments. Amrita Vishwa Vidyapeetham civil engineering faculty member Ramkrishnan Ramabhadran, who did the IISc study alongside senior scientist T V Ramachandra, says, "The most dangerous trend today is the clearing of forest land for new plantations and agricultural land — to cultivate tea, rubber, coffee, coconut etc."

And Munnar is not the only place to lose its forest lands — Manarkkad in Palakkad and Mankulam in Idukki are all in the list.

Ramachandra explains, "Kerala has many ecologically sensitive regions and wiping out those covers has been extremely detrimental for the environment. The State has endemic species of plants and animals and their removal affects the forest cover adversely. The plantations set up still might be vegetation, but they can never be a substitute for the natural canopy of a forest, root penetration, indigenous plants retention and most of all, the ecology of the forest. This results in drought."

The studies show that wherever the forest has the native species of vegetation, the streams in the region will be full all through the year. "Wherever people have converted them into monoculture plantation, water flows only six to eight months. Wherever the forests have been completely destroyed, the streams will dry after four months," Ramachandra says.

We need the mountains too!

Razing of mountains to the ground for construction purposes, to mine sand and laterite, and quarrying are some of the other reasons, says environmentalist C M Joy. "This reduces the height of the mountains, in turn, disrupting the climate of the area. "For example, Munnar lies adjacent to Madurai, which has a temperature as high as 50 degrees in summer. The hot winds from Madurai blow towards Munnar, affecting its cloud formation and rains, which, in turn, affects our forests. That affects our ground water, which forms the flow in our rivers in summer, resulting in long and intense summers," he explains.

Using hilly areas like Munnar and Parambikkulam for illegal construction purposes can also result in the loss of forest cover, Ramkrishnan feels. "When there are no forest covers to arrest the runoff water, it can result in flash floods too. It also lead to the erosion of fertile topsoil erosion and silting in dam reservoirs, reducing their storage levels," he explains.

Don't just plant trees, take care of them

Scientific, sensitive and sensible afforestation is the only solution mentioned by most of the experts, to help Kerala's topography to return to normal. Ramkrishnan says, "These days, a lot of people organise tree planting campaigns in their locality. Well and good, but the hard part is to maintain and take care of them, till they spread roots and grow well. Assign individuals or children to this and make them directly involved in these activities, and reward them accordingly too. This also helps in raising their awareness about the situation. Ample afforestation increases water retention and helps raising the ground water table."

We also need to take up forestation on the hills on a war footing, say experts. Ramachandra says, "Kerala should take up the greening of their landscape in a big way, and they should start off by planting native species of plants in each of the regions. Most importantly, the young generation should take the initiative to try to understand the importance of trees, which play an important part in ensuring that we have water. Dollar or rubber can't feed hungry mouths."

Environmentalist C R Neelakantan echoes his views. "It is important to do afforestation, taking into account the nature and terrain of the forest, scientifically. And in such areas, human interference should also be cut down. Only then can we really benefit

from attempting to create forest covers."

But who will water the saplings?

At the same time, it is not easy to take care of a tree, admits environmentalist Irish Valsamma. "Planting of saplings is gradually becoming impractical. First of all, you can only plant them in a place where you are sure it will be taken care of. Also, from December till May, they won't be getting enough rain water. People are interested only in fruit-bearing trees, or maybe teak or mahogany. It is also difficult to find the suitable soil to plant saplings. For instance, to plant a sapling in Kochi, where do you find some good soil? You will have to buy soil for `600 a bag."

However, considering that we have damaged our green cover beyond repair, the least every individual can do is ensure that they won't disturb nature, will curb pollution and also plant as many trees as possible. Athira Sasi, a nature lover, says, "Everyone can see the climatic changes and the issues we face because of it. Most of us also know the little steps we should take, like saving rain water, saving our trees, using bio-degradable products etc. Let's ensure that we take those small steps and start somewhere."