

Reserve Forests Are Important, but Over 3 Lakh Hectares Are Being Encroached

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Papanasam Reserved Forests. Photo: L.vivian.richard/Public domain

- *Responding to a query in the Rajya Sabha, the environment ministry said that more than three lakh hectares of reserved forest in India is under encroachment.*
- *Reserved forests are forests declared by state governments and are provided for under the Indian Forest Act, 1927.*
- *These forests support a range of biodiversity and local communities rely on them in many ways.*

Kochi: According to the Union environment ministry, more than three lakh hectares of reserved forest in India is under encroachment.

Responding to a query in the Rajya Sabha on February 3, minister of state for environment Ashwini Choubey said that a total of 3,67,214 hectares of reserved forest land has been encroached upon across the country.

has the highest illegal occupancy of forests in India, closely 53,450 hectares of encroached land, showed data shared by



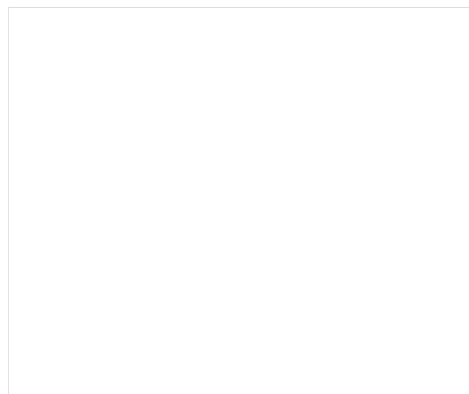
Encroachment is a serious concern, given that reserve forests are as important as protected areas – for not just wildlife and biodiversity but people too.

What are reserved forests?

Reserved forests are tracts of forest or other lands (including natural landscapes such as savanna grasslands that are classified officially as ‘wastelands’) that can be declared as such by state governments. This is provided for legally in the Indian Forest Act, 1927. This was how the Northern Ridge near Delhi University – spread over 137 hectares – was declared a reserved forest recently.

Specific reserved forests that are “rich in wildlife” can be declared as sanctuaries, national parks, community reserves and conservation reserves, which gives “additional protection” to these areas, said G.V. Reddy, retired chief wildlife warden of the Rajasthan Forest Department. For example, of the 32,000 square km of forest area in Rajasthan, only around 9,500 are designated wildlife sanctuaries or national parks. The rest are all either reserved forests or protected forests (another category of forest as per the Indian Forest Act), he added.

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“However, this doesn’t mean that reserved forests are less protected,” he said.

The Indian Forest Act permits activities such as collection of non-timber forest produce and grazing in reserved forests – but only if approved by a forest settlement officer. In such cases, these tracts are directly important for local communities and their livelihoods. For example, a study found that one-fourth of villagers in and around the Patharia Hills reserve forest in south Assam were dependent on non-timber forest produce – including the stems, fruits and leaves of herbs, shrubs and trees – harvested from the area in some way or the other.

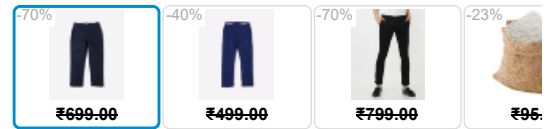
The Act also provides for the protection of reserved forests, including prohibiting activities such as logging, quarrying, hunting, or lighting fires in these areas. These forests come under the territorial forest divisions of states and are managed under working plans that are revised once in ten years, said B.C. Nagaraja, professor and chairman of the Department of Environmental Science in Bangalore University.

The total area under reserved forests in India is 4,42,276 square km, according to data submitted by Choubey in the Rajya Sabha on February 3. This data, however, is as per the recent State of Forest Report 2021, which has drawn flak from experts for its flawed methodology.

As important as PAs

Reserved forests, just like protected areas, support many er species.

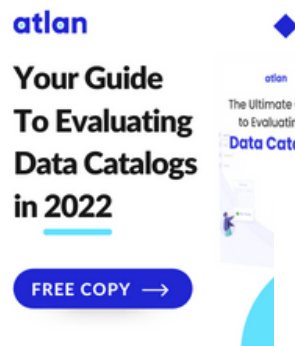
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Eugenia singampattiana, a threatened tree species closely related to the jamun tree, is endemic to the southern Western Ghats. Specifically, it has been reported only from the Tirunelveli district in Tamil Nadu. Collectors first described it from here in the 1860s and 1870s. And after 112 years, botanists rediscovered it from the Papanasam Reserved Forests in the region.

Reserved forests are also home to many charismatic wild mammals. Though most dhole populations are restricted to protected forest habitats, they also occur in reserve forests and production agroforests (like tea and coffee plantations), wrote wildlife biologist Arjun Srivathsa in *Down To Earth*. Reserved forests often serve as integral buffer areas for wildlife sanctuaries and other protected areas. In many cases, wildlife corridors – areas consisting of forest or other landscapes that animals can use to move from one wild patch to another – are often reserved forests too.

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For example, *Times of India* reported on February 5 that a radio-collared tigress walked a staggering 250 km from Satpura to Melghat in Maharashtra, crossing 11 forest ranges and four wildlife divisions that comprise wildlife corridors including the Bhaura and Bharetha near Satpura. These ranges, divisions and corridors are all reserved forests, said wildlife biologist Milind Pariwakam of the Wildlife Conservation Trust and member of the IUCN Connectivity Conservation Specialist Group, who studies tiger movement and dispersal in these areas.

“So without these reserved forests, there can be no connectivity and no tiger population viability,” he told *The Wire Science*.

Conservationists have also called for notifying more reserved forests as conservation reserves to strengthen the wildlife corridor in the Sahyadri-Konkan landscape of the central Western Ghats.

In fact, in terms of ecological importance, including sustaining biodiversity, reserved forests are “on par” with protected areas, said Nagaraja.

“They are not secondary at all. But yes, they have been ignored because everyone focuses on protected areas.”

Under threat

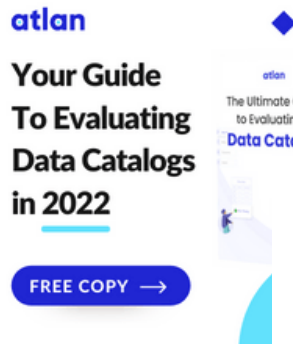
Thus, considering the ecological significance of reserved forests, encroachment is a serious concern. A team including ecologists at Guwahati-based conservation NGO Aaranyak found that encroachment and the illegal felling of trees were resulting in the loss of habitat of the eastern

hoolock gibbon in the reserved forests of Sadiya, Assam. In a team members found that agriculture expansion was the main cause of forest loss in the district.



Incidentally, data tabled by the environment ministry in parliament in June last year revealed that 13.35 lakh hectares of forest land – including reserved forests and protected areas – is currently under encroachment across the country. However, activists said the data was misleading because it also counts forest land that tribal communities own – and which they have legal rights to as per the Forest Rights Act, 2006 – as encroachment.

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Meanwhile, Choubey said that his ministry has written to state governments and union territory administrations to remove encroachments and ensure that no further encroachment takes place as per the existing acts and rules.

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