

KARNATAKA

State got approval to use 1,355 ha of forest land for non-forestry purposes in 5 years

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Forest clearances being given at an alarming rate, say environmentalists

In the last five years, Karnataka got approval to use 1,355.25 hectares (ha) of forest land for non-forestry purpose under the Forest (Conservation) Act, 1980.

Responding to an unstarred question in the Lok Sabha recently, Minister of State in the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change, Ashwini Kumar Choubey said a total of 82,893.61 ha of forest land has been approved for non-forestry use under the Forest (Conservation) Act, 1980, from April 2016 to March 2021.

He further said that 206 proposals involving 4,118.109067 ha area within Protected Areas, including national parks and sanctuaries, have been recommended by the Standing Committee of National Board for Wildlife during 2020 and 2021.

The State/UT-wise approved areas for use of forest land for non-forestry purpose under the Act for Karnataka showed that it went up from 199.20 ha in 2016-17 to 326.52 ha in 2017-18. After 139.64 ha in 2018-19, it again increased to 390.12 ha in 2019-2020. In 2020-21, it was 299.78 ha.

In comparison, neighbouring Kerala had a total approved area of just 9.21 ha and Tamil Nadu 81.91 ha. However, Andhra Pradesh had 2,713.53 ha, Telangana 8209.32 ha, and Maharashtra, 3615.62 ha.

Among the States and UTs, Jammu and Kashmir had the least: 1.20 ha, all of which was approved in 2020-21. Madhya Pradesh had the highest, with 19638.41 ha being approved for diversion.

Move criticised

This massive diversion has been criticised by environmentalists. "Approvals under the Act for non-forestry purposes should be allowed only as a stark exception. However, it is shocking to see that the forest clearances are being given at such a rate," said wildlife conservationist Giridhar Kulkarni.

The Ministry of Environment, Forest, and Climate Change, which is having statutory and constitutional obligations to protect the forests, is giving clearances in the name of ease of doing business, which is really unfortunate, he added.

The percentage of Karnataka's forest area in comparison to its geographical area is admittedly lower than the all-India average, as well as the percentage recommended by the National Forest Policy, which is 33%.

Chief Minister Basavaraj Bommai, who had this year announced an "environment budget" to compensate the damages caused to the environment along with annual estimations of green areas in the State, had said that Karnataka has 43 lakh hectares of forest, which is 21.5%.

TV. Ramachandra from the Centre for Ecological Sciences, Indian Institute of Science (IISc), said forests in the Western Ghats provide water security to peninsular India, which in turn provides food security. "Naturally, any diversion is going to lead to loss of water and hurt livelihoods of people. Wherever there is native forest, earnings are higher and pollinators are diverse, due to which yield is higher. That means we are threatening food security and water security," he said.

What we need now is natural capital accounting and valuation of ecosystem services, and to think about whether the diversions have better benefit than the ecosystem, he added. "Skewed policies and colonial mindset are leading to environment degradation. Large scale projects are being pushed in the name of drinking water schemes," he said.

The purpose-wise details of proposals involving 50 ha or more area approved during 2016-17 to 2020-21 for the country showed that irrigation, mining and defence had the highest numbers.

Dr. Ramachandra recommended that we take advantage of technological advancements to plan projects, as well as looking at the cost people pay for calamities due to improper projects by way of loss of life and property.

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