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Home > India > Karnataka >

Mekedatu to submerge Karnataka forests worth Rs 81.6 bn

The first-ever analysis of the economic worth of forest resources by the IISc shows that each hectare of forests in Karnataka is worth Rs 6.56 lakh annually

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The reservoir project will submerge more than 52 sq km of forests. Credit: DH Photo

Karnataka might be determined to execute the Mekedatu project but the state government is perhaps unaware of what it is likely to lose in terms of economy.

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forests worth about "Rs 81.60 billion".

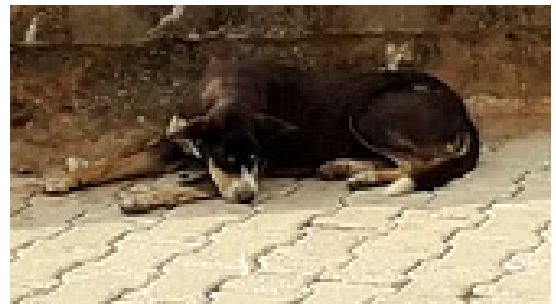
The first-ever analysis of the economic worth of forest resources by the IISc shows that each hectare of forests in Karnataka is worth Rs 6.56 lakh annually. The estimation has been carried out as per the United Nations 'natural capital accounting and valuation of ecosystem services' (NCAVES) project that was launched in 2017 with a view to improving the measurement of ecosystems and their services (physical, monetary).

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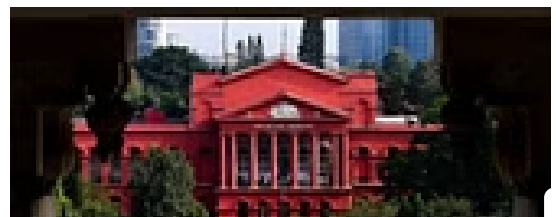
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The project was rolled out on a pilot basis in five countries that are rich in natural capital and biodiversity, including India, which is part of the System of Environmental-Economic Accounting (SEEA) framework. Karnataka was the only state in the country where the analysis was carried out by ecological scientists.

Chief Minister Basavaraj Bommai had in fact directed the forest department in September 2021 to estimate the losses to natural resources and the total deficit, with a promise to address that deficit in the form of a 'Green Budget'.

Dr T V Ramachandra, scientist and coordinator at the Energy and Wetland Research Group at the Centre for Ecological Sciences in IISc, who led the team, told DH that Karnataka was chosen for the global project as there was already a similar estimation done by his team of researchers for Uttara Kannada district.

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"Initially, the UN wanted the study to be done in 10 districts of Karnataka. But we ended up doing it for all the districts. The services of any forest ecosystem are estimated considering the provisioning, regulating and cultural significance of forests," Ramachandra explained.

While provisioning services include any benefit to humans which is directly extracted from nature such as food, timber and fuel, regulating services comprise benefits provided by the ecosystem to aid natural phenomena like carbon sequestration, water purification, climate regulation and flood control. Cultural services constitute recreation and spiritual experiences.

"A total of 48.35 sq km (4,835 hectares) of forest land (about 3,000 hectares in the Cauvery Wildlife Sanctuary) is expected to be affected directly. If you extrapolate the

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ecological compensation of Rs 85 to 100 billion to the Karnataka Forest Department (KFD), which is the total NPV of the forest to be submerged based on the annual ecosystem services.

The researchers' team found it ironic that the state government is spending a whopping Rs 5,912 crore to build a balancing reservoir to hold 65 TMC of water when the forest in the area is actually worth Rs 81.60 billion (NPV) and aid in retaining 100 TMC of water every year.

"The viable alternative to avert this possible disaster is to catch rainwater in Bengaluru. The city gets 750 to 850 mm of rainfall annually which in itself amounts to 15 TMC of water. We require about 18 TMC of water annually. With rainwater harvesting and wastewater treatment, the city will have more than 30 TMC of water, which is the best and most economical option. The government should invest in the rejuvenation of lakes and decentralised wastewater treatment options than destroying 5,000 hectares of ecologically and hydrologically vital forests," the researchers said.

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