

## Remote sensing data shows massive diversion of forest land in Munnar

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The remote sensing data also shows a massive increase in areas under plantations, agriculture and urban settlements while substantial reduction in open areas in Munnar. Photo: iStockphoto

**Bengaluru:** Thousands of hectares of forest land in a region of Kerala that is one of the world's greatest biodiversity hotspots have disappeared, remote sensing data shows.

Data obtained by two researchers working on a project at the Indian Institute of Science (IISc) shows 7.71%—or 13,638.43 hectares—of forest land in Devikulam revenue taluk in the western ghats just don't exist anymore.

The data, accessed by Ramkrishnan Ramabhadran, an assistant professor at Coimbatore-based Amrita School of Engineering, and T.V. Ramachandra, head of the Center for Ecological Studies at IISc in Bengaluru, has been reviewed by *Mint*.

For perspective, the rate of forest depletion for all of Kerala between 1980 and 2016 was 3.6%—the third-highest proportion of forest land diversion among Indian states.

The denuded area discovered by satellites is near the tourist resort of Munnar, a hilly region that plays a crucial role in Kerala's forest ecology.

Last week, the state government put a pause on eviction drive to clear encroachments in Munnar, which created an uproar. Spanning about 19,239 sq km, forests form almost half of the state's total area.

Idukki district, which includes Munnar, tops the state's districts in forest cover (3,770 sq km) and Devikulam accounts for more than one-third of this. There are three national parks in the area, and three rivers originate here.

The remote sensing data also shows a massive increase in areas under plantations, agriculture and urban settlements while substantial reduction in open areas in Munnar. The data substantiates official reports of rampant encroachment that has facilitated the emergence of Munnar as a top tourist destination—the single biggest reason for the degradation of the region's biodiversity.

Land use changes at this scale underline the failure of regulatory mechanisms to prevent encroachment, said Harish Vasudevan, lawyer and environmental activist based in Kerala.

All of this, however, exists only on paper.

Ironically, he said, it should be harder to build anything in Munnar than anywhere else in Kerala.

About 86,000 hectares in Munnar and Cardamom Hill Reserve is forest land, as identified by a special committee constituted of the Supreme Court, which means central and state forest laws apply within this region. Devikulam also has a bespoke land use policy, said Vasudevan.

Besides, construction in the region is supposed to be only allowed for two purposes—agriculture and residential use, which itself requires sanctions all the way up from panchayat to the revenue department. Apart from these, from time to time, authorities impose further curbs like a bar on building more than three storeys.

Hundreds of huge construction projects have cropped up in the area, violating all norms. In 2005, an empowered committee appointed by the Supreme Court visited Munnar and discovered hundreds of forged title deeds, made to encroach forest lands. The violators included then parliamentarians, relatives of ministers and political leaders.