

Forest cover declines marginally

India's forest cover has shrunk marginally, says the latest government report. The reduction of 367 sq km (about the size of the Ranthambore National Park) means that the total forested land in the country is 23.81% of the geographical area.

The reduction implies the ministry of environment and forests will be even more uncomfortable with industrial projects in green areas. The 'India State of Forest Report, 2011' shows that while 12 states registered a fall in forest and tree cover, 15 states — led by Punjab — showed an increase. The report is prepared by the Forest Survey of India (FSI), Dehradun, every alternate year based on satellite images. The shrinking of forest cover was first reported by FE.

"There is not much floral and faunal impact of the reduction (of forest cover) because we added more than 500 sq km of high-quality dense forests in the period, which gives better habitat to the flora and fauna," said T Chatterjee, environment secretary, while releasing the report. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh had earlier said that the country's forest cover had increased by nearly 5% between 1997 and 2007 and decreased only marginally since.

Forest cover in India of all categories stood at 78.29 million hectares in 2009, down from 78.37 million ha in 2007. The numbers make it evident that the environment ministry's ambition of having 33% of India's geographical area under green cover will be difficult to achieve soon.

Interestingly, of the total area lost, about half or 182 sq km was in left wing extremism-affected districts of Warangal and Khammam in Andhra Pradesh. Besides, for the first time, the report has also assessed bamboo resources, production-consumption of wood and carbon stock in India's forests.

Moreover, the forest cover has declined 548 sq km and 679 sq km in the hill and tribal districts of the country, respectively, while the northeastern states — which account for a quarter of India's forest cover — have registered a dip of 549 sq km. Area wise, very dense forests constitute 2.54%, moderately dense forests 9.76%, open forests 8.75%, scrub 1.28 % and tree cover 2.76% of the total geographical area, while the rest is non-forest.

The report revealed that of the total population using wood as fuel, 23% obtain fuelwood from forests. Further, the total growing stock of India's forest and trees is 6,047 million cubic metres.

India however is almost a unique country where the forest cover has risen in the last few years. By 2009 the national forest cover had risen to 21%. From the year 2000, the forest cover in the country had increased by 3.31 million hectares, an average increase of 0.46% per year (Fin Exp 8-2-12).