

Will there be an end to this conflict?

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The man-animal conflict has been going on for quite some time now. The most recent incident of this kind occurred in Chittoor district, where herds of pachyderms trampled standing crops there. But no efforts are being made to get to the root of this issue and solve the same, which arises mainly near town-forest borders.

Environmentalists say the problem arises mainly due to encroachment of forest lands by humans in the name of development and 'catering to the needs of poor'.

The total forest area of 63.81 lakh hectare has reduced considerably.

According to the information provided by environment minister Jayanthi Natarajan, the total forest area lost to encroachments in Andhra Pradesh in 2011 was 2.56 lakh hectares, which is only second to 2.59 lakh hectares of land lost in Assam.

However, it is very difficult to assess the actual loss as there no set procedure to quantify the hectares of land lost.

Senior officials in the forest department say the amount of land encroached upon is arrived at based on the cases booked against number of encroachments in a year.

The shortcoming of this method is obvious - the quantity of land lost cannot be be accurate as there are chances of multiple persons encroaching one land or one person encroaching multiple lands.

Who are the encroachers?

Cases are usually booked against tribals and people belonging weaker sections of the society, though political parties too legally infringe these areas in name of 'giving land to landless poor'.

Forest officials find it hard to recover the lost lands as court cases drag on for years, and officials say the rate of conviction in such cases is very less.

Even if a person is convicted, the maximum punishment in accordance with existing laws is imprisonment for 1 - 2 years or a fine of Rs 2,000 or both, which is not a deterrent enough for the infringers to not repeat the offence.

State Forest Act, which is quite lenient when compared to the central Wildlife Act, has not been amended since it was adopted in the late 1960s. Proposals to toughen the law have been pending with the law makers since the past two decades.

Though there is considerable amount of land lost through illegal encroachments, the quantity of land that disappears 'legally' is a lot more.

In the name of development, tracts of forest lands are diverted for irrigation project, mining or other such purposes.

After Forest Conservation Act came into force in 1980, the government was forced to reimburse the forest department with alternative land for the tracts of forest diverted for its projects.

But environmentalists slam this move and ask how one can justify clearing of forests which are a thousand years old by providing 'alternate' land in lieu of it. "Forests lost in the process are lost forever," they say.

Responding to this, a senior forest official on the condition of anonymity said their argument was valid. "But given the increasing demands of the ever-growing population, government has to provide land for living, growing food and meeting other requirements of development. It is for policy makers to decide what sort of future they want the coming generations to face. Whether they want to restrict forests to history books or want to protect the remaining lands, it is their choice," the official said.

He said though the state lost a considerable area during the Naxal movement in 70s and 80s, more damage was done after the implementation of Forest Rights Act in 2006, which permits tribals and other marginalised communities dependent of forests for their livelihood to cultivate on such lands.

Since talks of implementing such an act was finalised in 2005, a number of people, assuming that forest land used for cultivation would be regularised, began encroaching such lands. Large tracts of land were taken over during 2007-09.

"The case is similar to that of waiver of farmer loans by the government. First, the National Front Government that waived it, saying such an exercise will not be done again. Then the UPA came into power and dispensed with the loan, saying they will not repeat it again. Now, Chandrababu Naidu is promising total farmer loan waiver. Politicians think only of their immediate agenda and are least bothered about the future consequences. There is no guarantee of our forests being safe," another senior forest official explained.