

AIR Spotlight: International Day of Forests

AIR Spotlight is an insightful program featured daily on the All India Radio News on air. In this program, many eminent panellists discuss issues of importance which can be quite helpful in [IAS exam](#) preparation.

This article is about the discussion on: **International Day of Forests**

Participants:

1. Mukul Sanwal: Environmentalist
2. Omvesh Upadhyay: AIR Correspondent

Context - Forests provide directly or indirectly important health benefits for all people, not only for those whose lives are closely intertwined with the forest ecosystem but also for people who live far from forests including the urban population. Recognition of the importance of forests for food security and nutrition has significantly increased in recent years. Every year 21st of March is celebrated as the International Day of Forests.

International Day of Forests/World Forest Day

The United Nations General Assembly proclaimed 21 March the International Day of Forests in 2012 to celebrate and raise awareness of the importance of forests. Countries are encouraged to undertake local, national and international efforts to organise activities involving forests and trees, such as tree planting campaigns.

- International Day of Forests, 2023 was celebrated with the theme, “Forests and Health”. Forests give so much to our health, they purify the water, clean the air, capture carbon to fight climate change, provide food and life-saving medicines, and improve our well-being.
- The IDF (International Day of Forests) raises awareness of the indispensable role of different types of forests in supporting a wide range of benefits to human health that include food security and nutrition thereby aligning with the 2030 Agenda of the [Sustainable Development Goals](#) (SDGs), particularly SDG 3 (Good Health & Well-being) and SDG 15 (Life on Land).

Indian Forest Cover

As per the India State of Forests Report (ISFR), 2021, the total forest and tree cover of the country is 80.9 million hectares which is 24.62% of the geographical area of the country. As compared to 2019, there has been an increase of 2,261 sq km in the total forest and tree cover of the country. Out of this, the increase in the forest cover has been observed as 1,540 sq km and that in tree cover is 721 sq km.

- 17 States/UTs have more than 33% of the geographical area under forest cover.
- Area-wise Madhya Pradesh has the largest forest cover in the country followed by Arunachal Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Odisha and Maharashtra.
- In terms of forest cover as a percentage of the total geographical area, Mizoram tops the list followed by Arunachal Pradesh and Meghalaya.
- The top three states showing an increase in forest cover are Andhra Pradesh followed by Telangana and Odisha.

Urban Forests

Urban Green Spaces are increasingly considered critical assets within the context of sustainability as they provide multiple benefits ranging from reducing pollution, enhancing physical and mental health, enriching aesthetics and reducing the [urban heat island effect](#).

- The GoI has a strong drive to expand the green cover by promoting trees outside forests (ToF) including agroforestry systems, river catchments and urban greens.
- The Green Highways Policy, 2015 aims to plant trees along all the highways in the country in order to reduce the impact of heat, air and noise pollution and check soil erosion.
- The [AMRUT](#) (Atal Mission for Rejuvenation & Urban Transformation) aims to increase the amenity values of cities by developing greenery and well-maintained open space parks.

Forests & Medicine -

Dependency of humans on forests for medicine dates back at least almost 5000 years. From old times to modern times, pharma industry's need for raw materials is also making forests a crucial asset in terms of the direct relationship between human health and medicinal need with forests.

- From masks to medicines, forest products are used around the world every day. As many as 80% of developing nations and one-quarter of developed countries depend on plant-based medicinal drugs.
- Forests contain about 50,000 plant species used for medicinal purposes by both local communities and multinational pharmaceutical companies. Many common pharmaceutical medicines are rooted in forest plants, including cancer-treating drugs from the Madagascar periwinkle and malaria medication, quinine, from cinchona trees.
- The use of plants as medicines has a long history in the treatment of various diseases. The plant-derived compounds have a long history of clinical use, and better patient tolerance and acceptance. Natural products discovered so far have played a vital role in improving human health due to their safety and efficacy.

Encroachment into Forests

Encroachment into forests increases the risk of contracting diseases from animals.

- The loss of forests/deforestation can act as an incubator for insect-borne and other infectious diseases that afflict humans.
- The risk of disease outbreaks can be greatly magnified after forests are cleared for agriculture and roads.
- Once a disease has left a forested region, it can travel in human beings, crossing the world in a matter of a few hours by aeroplane before the person even shows the symptoms. The outbreaks exacerbated by human alteration of landscapes could cause the next pandemic.

Conclusion - Forests play a critical role in the global environment, population and economy. Besides reducing the effects of climate change and natural disasters, they represent some of the richest biological areas on the earth. They provide food, renewable raw material and livelihood for millions of people.

