



POINT OF VIEW

# The Wood for the Trees...

By Sharachandra Lele

India, in its latest submission to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), has claimed that the rate of carbon sequestration in its forests and croplands jumped by 50 per cent between 2010 and 2014. With dismal stories of rampant deforestation being more common, the news of carbon being sequestered and its rate increasing seemed too good to be true. And, indeed, the UNFCCC has asked India to re-check its submission on forest carbon and forest cover and share more details regarding the sources. What gives?

The government defines forests as simply an area with more than 10 per cent tree canopy cover, whether in its internal biennial State of Forest reports, or in its report to the UNFCCC. Their estimate of 'forest cover' includes horticultural plantations of coffee, tea, rubber, cashew, coconut, or areca nut, and farm forestry plantations of eucalyptus, casuarina and poplar, along with single-species plantations of teak, pine or eucalyptus present on public lands.

Environmentalists have long complained about this.

We monitor forests because

we want to conserve them, not just for the carbon they sequester, but also for the biodiversity they offer, their hydrological benefits and the multiple products (firewood, fodder, medicinal plants, bamboo) they provide to local communities. These benefits are generally far lower in horticultural or silvicultural plantations than in natural or semi-natural, multi-species forest. Only carbon sequestration rates and timber productivity are possibly higher in plantations.

Mapping and tracking the area of natural forests separately can prevent countries from meeting their carbon sequestration targets at the cost of these benefits. This was agreed upon in the United Nations Climate Change Conference in 2010 in Cancún. India's claim that this separation is difficult is simply untenable in today's age of multi-season, high-resolution satellite imagery. The forest departments prefer this lumping so that it hides their continued focus on

plantations in afforestation programmes.

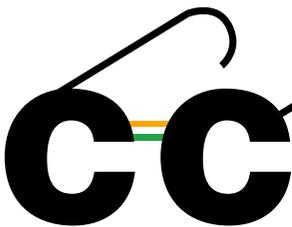
The UNFCCC pointed out the opacity in India's estimates and thereby its unreliability. For instance, the jump in sequestration rates reported in the Second Biennial Update Report of 2018 (not yet made public) hides the fact that sequestration rates in forests show a decline, whereas those in croplands show a dramatic (and unlikely) increase.

This opacity also points to the heart of the problem: the whole system is manned by foresters themselves and controlled by the ministry. The maps, the ground truth, the sample plot locations and the data sets, on which forest carbon estimates are based are not in the public domain. There is no credible, independent process involving scientists and citizens. The government prefers to mix categories and fudge estimates because it hopes to 'sell' this 'forest carbon' to offset the emissions of rich countries.

Policy-makers are blinded by this supposed market for forest carbon offsets, and forest departments are happy to tag along for the funds it might bring in. But, forests are not meant to serve some singular national goal. They provide diverse benefits to multiple stakeholders, like the 250 million forest-dependent people of India. These communities are slowly asserting their historic rights, using the Forest Rights Act, 2006. A carbon-centric forest policy will hurt these communities, as well as the biodiversity.

Recognising multiple stakes and stakeholders will enable us to devise multi-dimensional and robust systems of monitoring and reporting all forest benefits in ways that will have both international credibility as well as local legitimacy. Enabling local communities to decide priorities in areas they use, and supporting them with carbon and other funds, will ensure that these multiple benefits are sequestered for the long run. ■

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**Policymakers, blinded by the supposed market for carbon offsets, encourage fudging numbers on forest carbon sequestration. But forests do not exist for some singular national goal**