



Deemed Forests in Karnataka

 drishtiias.com/printpdf/deemed-forests-in-karnataka

Why in News

Recently, **Karnataka** has announced that it would **declassify 6.64 lakh hectares** (nearly 67%) of the 9.94 lakh hectares of **deemed forests** in the state and hand it over to Revenue authorities.

The issue of deemed forests is a contentious one in Karnataka, with legislators across party lines often **alleging that large amounts of agriculture and non-forest land are “unscientifically” classified** as such.

Key Points

- **Definition of Deemed Forests:**

- Deemed forests, **comprising about 1% of India’s forest land**, are a controversial subject as they **refer to land tracts that appear to be a “forest”, but have not been notified so by the government or in historical records.**
- The concept of deemed forests **has not even been clearly defined in any law** including the **Forest Conservation Act 1980.**
- In the ***T N Godavarman Thirumalpad case 1996***, the **Supreme Court** (SC) accepted a **wide definition of forests** under the Act and held that the word ‘forest’ must be **understood according to its dictionary meaning.**
This description **covers all statutorily recognised forests**, whether designated as reserved, protected or otherwise for the purpose of **Section 2 (1) of the Act** and also includes any **areas recorded as forest in the government record irrespective of the ownership.**
- The **provisions for the conservation of forest and the matters connected therewith applies clearly to all forests** irrespective of the ownership or classification.
- The **freedom to define which tracts of forest** qualify as forest has been the **prerogative of States since 1996.**
However, this **only applies to forest land** that has not already been historically classified as “forest” in revenue records, or categorised so by the government as “protected” or “reserve forest”.

- **Deemed Forests in Karnataka:**

- **Areas Included:** An expert committee constituted by the state government **identified ‘deemed forests’ as:**
 - Land having the characteristic of forests irrespective of the ownership.
 - Thickly wooded areas of the Revenue Department, not handed over to the Forest Department.
 - Thickly wooded areas recommended to be handed over to the Forest Department.
 - Thickly wooded land distributed to grantees but not cultivated.
 - Thickly wooded plantations of the Forest Department.
- **Land Coverage:** The **expert committee reports in 1997 and 2002** identified 43.18 lakh hectares of forest land for conservation in Karnataka, which included 33.23 lakh hectares notified forest area as per forest records and 9.94 lakh hectares ‘deemed forests’.
- **Issue of Contention:**
 - In **2014**, the government **relooked at the categorisation of forests** and found that some of the ‘statutory forests’ had been **wrongly classified** as ‘deemed forest’.
 - It also held that a **well-defined scientific, verifiable criterion was not used** while applying the dictionary definition which **resulted in a subjective classification** of areas as deemed forests.
 - The subjective classification, in turn, resulted in **conflicts between the Forest Department and other departments** like Revenue, Irrigation, Public Works and Energy.
 - The random classification caused **hardship to farmers** in some areas and there is also a **commercial demand for mining in some regions** designated as deemed forests.
- **Revised Coverage:**
 - Later, newly formed committees identified 5.18 lakh hectares of deemed forest land that could be released from the total area.
 - After a **recent study of the actual extent of deemed forest areas**, the amount of deemed forest land to be released has been **revised to 6.64 lakh hectares**.
 - In **2019**, the **state had filed an interim application** in the SC for the exclusion of the revised area but the **Court did not pass an order** on the application.

Forest and Tree Resources in Karnataka

- **Total Forest cover:** 20.11%, according to the **India State of Forest Report 2019**, the **16th biennial assessment of India's forests** by Forest Survey of India (FSI).
 - FSI is an organisation **under the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change** (MoEFCC).
 - It undertakes **National Forest Inventory** to assess the growing stock in forests and Tree Outside Forest (TOF), bamboo resource, carbon stock and to assess the dependence of the people living in Forest Fringe Villages for fuelwood, fodder, small timber and bamboo.
- **Physiographically**, the state can be divided into two distinct regions:
 - **Hilly region** (*Malnad*): comprising the **Western Ghats**.
 - **Plain region** (*Maidan*): comprising the inland plateau.
- The **evergreen forests** of the Western Ghats cover about 60% of the forest area of the State and are recognised as **one of the four Biodiversity Hotspots of India**.
Other three biodiversity hotspots are the **Himalayas, Areas under Indo-Burma and Sundalands**.
- **Protected Area Network of the State:** 5 National Parks (Anshi, **Bandipur**, Bannerghatta, Kudremukh, Nagarahole) 30 Wildlife Sanctuaries, 15 Conservation Reserves.
Karnataka supports about 10% of the total **tiger** population and 25% of the **elephant** population of the country.

Source: IE