

Red alert over

Neha Madaan | TNN

Pune: Over 13 lakh trees have been illegally cut in state-owned forests since 2005, depriving Maharashtra of its precious forest wealth. The number of felled trees could be a minuscule fraction of the total tree strength in the state's forests, it is a worrisome drop nonetheless, say forest officials and activists.

Over the last eight years, the state's forests have lost one to two lakh trees every year. Incidentally, Pune circle has recorded the lowest felling incidence over the years, with 376 trees illicitly cut between January and December 2012.

A senior state official of the forest department said that although the situation cannot be considered alarming, the incidence of tree felling in forests cannot be ignored as it is detrimental to the environment. "A lot of illicit tree felling is observed in Sironcha in Gadchiroli district as it is near the state border of Andhra Pradesh and has considerable Naxal activity. Also, this type of illegal tree felling is prominent in Dhule, where considerable encroachment is seen in forests when villagers enter forest areas under the Forest Rights Act (FRA) and cut trees and build habitations," said the official.

The official added that the government has also formed a committee to check illicit tree felling in Gadchiroli. "Other protection measures include providing forest guards and other officials with 750 pistols and 800 self-loading rifles as well as training 3,000 officials across the state in measures needed to reduce illicit felling of trees. We also recently gave 100 additional jeeps to range forest officers in affected areas such as Dhule and Gadchiroli as part of their mo-

bile squad units," the official said.

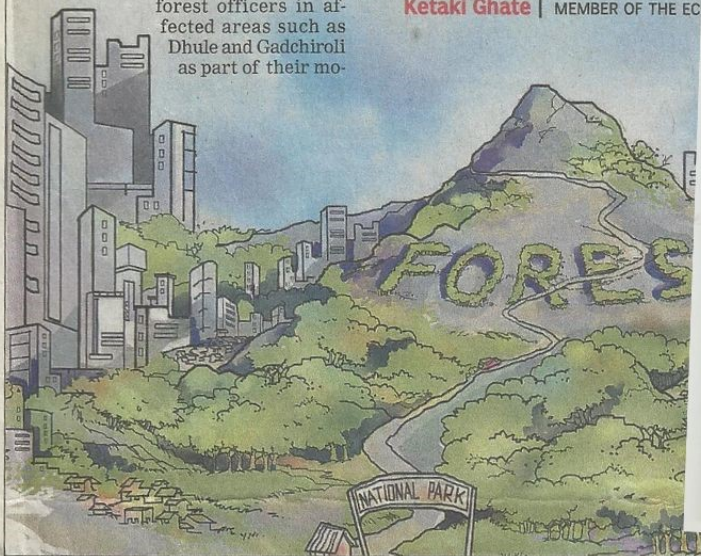
He further added that every year, on average, a little over 1.67 lakh trees are cut illegally in state forests, which is 0.018% of the total standing trees in forest areas. "There are about 88.25 crore trees in the state's forest areas under the forest department. The trees cut illicitly are not more than the annual increment of forests. The only problem lies in certain pockets where illicit cutting takes place as part of organized felling of trees, such as Dhule, Yavatmal and Gadchiroli circles. It is in these areas that tree cutting is more than the other parts and thus poses threat to the ecology," he said.

Another senior state official said that total elimination of illicit tree felling in forest areas is not possible as forest areas are open from all directions and people cannot be prevented from entering them. "Majority of the trees cut as part of the illicit felling are of short girth and the wood is used by villagers for building their habitations, fencing and other jobs," he said.

The highest incidence of illicit tree felling is seen in the year 2009-10, when over 2 lakh trees were cut in state-owned forests. Forests in the Dhule circle topped with 46,131 trees illegally cut, tally by the Nagpur circle showing 27,208 trees illegally chopped, followed

When trees are cut in large area tends to fragment, w destruction. Even if one of ecosystem and the fauna t on each layer of that tree

Ketaki Ghatge | MEMBER OF THE ECO



TIMES CITY

THE LAST 8 YEARS; OFFICIALS INTENSIFY CHECKS

Loss of green cover

By south Chandrapur with 21,318 trees cut, among others. Pune circle in this year recorded 3675 trees illegally cut in its forest areas.

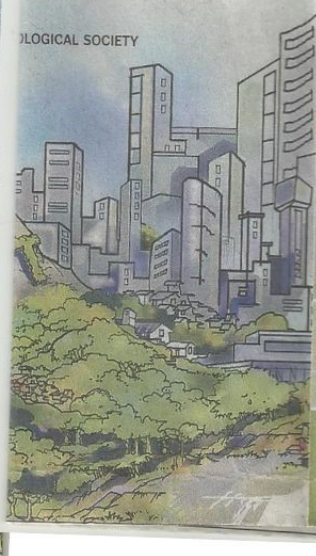
Kishor Rithe, member of the National Board for Wildlife (NBWL), however, called the situation serious, especially since the country was endeavoring to achieve a 33% forest cover as per the National Forest Policy of 1988. "At present, the forest cover of the country is 18% for open forests and about 10-12% for dense forests. Also, what is even more detrimental is losing even one inch of forest in areas such as sanctuaries and national parks, which are homes to tigers," he said.

Rithe said that cutting trees in such landscapes leads to fragmentation of forests, which ultimately results in animals straying into human habitats. This leads to economic losses by way of crop raiding by herbivores, life stock killings and attack on humans by carnivores.

Ketaki Ghatge, member of the Ecological Society, said that local native plants are associated with the wildlife in the forests. "When trees are cut in large numbers, the bigger forest area ends to fragment, which leads to habitat destruction. Even if one old-growth tree is cut, it is harmful to the ecosystem and the fauna that thrives on each layer of that tree," she said.

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OLOGICAL SOCIETY



TEAK IN TROUBLE

Maharashtra forests have many varieties of naturally growing teak trees. Of the total trees felled in the state's forests, more than half are those of teak species

YEAR	TREES CUT	TEAK	NON-TEAK
2007	1.86 lakh	88,640	97,578
2008	1.86 lakh	87,720	98,469
2009	2 lakh	10,046	10,0698
2010	1.66 lakh	81,445	84,914
2011	1.39 lakh	64,618	75,249
Between January 2012 to December 2012	1.26 lakh	56,292	69,845

COUNTING LOSSES

YEAR	TREES FELLED
2005-06	1.93 lakh
2007-08	1.86 lakh
2008-09	1.86 lakh
2009-10	2 lakh
Jan-Dec 2012	1.26 lakh



FELLING EVEN IN

CIRCLE	TREES FELLED
Chandrapur	8504
Gadchiroli	22,783
Nagpur	15,592
Dhule	16,802
Yavatmal	15,770
Pune	373

(FROM JANUARY 2012 TO DECEMBER 2012)

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State forest official

The highest incidence of illicit tree felling was seen in the year 2009-10, when **OVER 2 LAKH TREES** were cut in state-owned forests

Trees illegally felled in Dhule circle (highest in the state) in 2009-10 **46,131**

Trees illegally cut in Pune circle's forest areas in 2009-10 **3,675**