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By M Rajshekhar, ET Bureau Last Updated: Jul 21, 2014, 03:53:00 PM IST

Synopsis

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NEW DELHI: India has no more than 3.3 lakh sq kms of land under real forests, less than half the number claimed by the environment ministry in the 2013 forest survey released last week.

Among other impacts, low forest cover might be a contributing factor for poor rains as is the case so far this year. Says TR Shankar Raman, a forest biologist with Nature Conservation Foundation, "Studies have shown retaining forests is good for rainfall: air that passes over extensive forests brings more rain.

"Climate models have also shown how large-scale deforestation can reduce regional rainfall. Retaining natural forests in watersheds also

helps sustain water flows in streams for longer periods during the dry season."

The divergence has come to light due to a new methodology adopted by the Dehradun-based Forest Survey of India (FSI) this year.

Till now, the Forest Survey of India (FSI) was following a very expansive international definition for calculating forest cover: all lands, over a hectare in size, with tree canopies over at least 10 per cent of that area, irrespective of tree species and land ownership are counted as forest cover.

It is a definition which incorporates coffee plantations, orchards and even urban parks – like Delhi's Lodhi Gardens – into a country's land under forests.

Another definition, recorded forest area, gets closer to the popular understanding of a forest. Pertaining to all areas recorded as forests in government records, these largely consist of reserved forests and protected forests.

These fall under the jurisdiction of the forest department and provide ecological security to India –rivers originate from them, for one.

It is important to not mix up these two definitions. As a paper titled "Forest area estimation and reporting: implications for conservation, management and REDD+", published in Current Science's 10 May, 2014, issue noted, if a forest is cut down and a plantation goes up elsewhere, "it will be recorded as a net gain in forest cover." Even though a plantation cannot perform all the functions of a forest.

And yet, for years now, mix them up is what the FSI did. Its reports presented forest cover data but were silent on how recorded forest areas were doing.

That was because while the FSI was getting satellite images chronicling the distribution of trees and forests across the country, it did not have digitised forest boundaries it could use to isolate recorded forests for closer study.

It is this problem that has now been fixed. The FSI, says Rajesh Kumar, senior deputy director at the institution, turned to the Survey Of India's (SOI) topographic maps. While being prepared, these maps highlighted forest boundaries. Even today, says the FSI report, these boundaries "by and large" correspond to recorded forest area of the country. "This is not the perfect answer," says a former director-general of forests.

Even so, the 2013 FSI report is a step towards understanding how India's forests are doing. While the forest department (FD) has 771,821 sq km under its jurisdiction, we now know forests cover just 530,779 sq km of that land.

Seed forests, originating from seeds that naturally germinated in that area, account for just 63 per cent (or 334,390.77 sq km) of the land under the FD's command. In other words, natural forests account for just 43 per cent of the land under the forest department.

Similarly, states have been claiming that forests are present in almost all of their recorded forest areas. However, forest cover numbers in the so-called "greenwash" areas – lands marked as forestlands in the SOI reports – shows large declines.

Take Chhattisgarh. With 49,922 sq km of forests in greenwash areas, the state shows a net increase of 1 sq km. This includes 85 sq km of forestland which turned into non-forestland due to mining, encroachment, etc.

But between 2008 and 2010 alone, the centre and the state governments cleared about 290 sq km of forests – all from the FD's land – for non-forest use. Even if work has not started on clearing those forests yet, it will. And the state will lose more forest.

Another trend which is very visible is erosion in the quality of forests. Very dense forests are turning into ones with medium density. And those, in turn, are becoming open forests.