

Supreme Court Recognizes Forests as National Assets

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Context

The Supreme Court of India has recently emphasised the critical role of forests as a national asset and a significant contributor to the nation's financial wealth. In a judgement, the court highlighted that forests are not only vital for ecological balance but also have substantial economic value, particularly in the context of carbon sequestration and the global carbon credit market.

Key Points from the Supreme Court's Judgment

- **Forests as National Asset:** The court asserted that forests are a national asset, crucial for environmental stability, biodiversity conservation, and climate change mitigation.
- **Financial Contribution:** It was noted that forests contribute to the financial wealth of a country by serving as a major sink of carbon dioxide (CO₂). This carbon sink is valued conservatively at \$5 per tonne of CO₂, making India's forests worth approximately \$120 billion or ₹6 lakh crores.
- **Carbon Credit Significance:** The judgement pointed out that countries with excess forest cover could potentially sell their excess carbon credits to those in deficit, underlining the economic significance of forests.
- **Forest Conservation (Amendment) Act of 2023:** The judgement came at a pivotal time when the Forest Conservation (Amendment) Act of 2023 has attracted widespread

criticism for potentially paving the way for commercial exploitation of forests and exempting infrastructural projects from environmental clearance.

- **Protective Role Against Climate Change:** The court also highlighted the protective role of forests against climate change, emphasising the need for their conservation.

Critique of Forest Conservation (Amendment) Act, 2023

- This outcome takes on a wider implication in the backdrop of the current debate of the involvement of the public in forest governance through the Forest Conservation (Amendment) Act, 2023 (FCAA).
- There is widespread criticism about the amendment of the Act because it might be redundant of forest conservation efforts as there will be greater states autonomy to regularise encroachments in forest reserves and redirect forest lands for economic purposes
- This judgement functions as a corrective measure for the other sections of the FCAA being controversial, it reminds us of the focal significance of woodlands and the objective of their conservation.

Understanding Forests

- According to the Court position, the classifying process of forests as it was in 1996, Godavarman case awarded, exposes the two most important factors when defining forests i.e. the bureaucratic character of state and ecological manner.
- A mix of changing forest status in India reflects a complicated pattern, with presence of new open forests though one can register a decline of dense forests. Although the level of complexity is high, the understanding of the importance of this knowledge for conservation measures development is fundamental.
- **Significance of Forests:** Forests as diversity centres have a very important place in biodiversity because they nurture a rich variety of plants and animals, which are essential for ecosystem structure and function.
 - Additionally, they play a pivotal role in climate regulation, acting as carbon sinks and mitigating the impacts of climate change.
 - The Court's acknowledgment of these ecosystem services underscores the irreplaceable value of forests and the urgent need to protect them.
- **Threats to Indian Forests:** Despite their ecological significance, Indian forests face myriad threats ranging from deforestation and encroachment to mining and climate change-induced phenomena.
 - Rampant deforestation and unsustainable land-use practices pose existential threats to the integrity of forest ecosystems, necessitating concerted conservation efforts.

Conservation Efforts and Policy Imperatives

- India has implemented various conservation initiatives, including protected areas, afforestation programs, and community-based conservation models.
- However, effective forest conservation requires a holistic approach encompassing policy reforms, community participation, and sustainable land-use practices.

- Strengthening existing legal frameworks and enhancing enforcement mechanisms are imperative to safeguarding India's forests for future generations.

Conclusion

The Supreme Court's verdict on forest conservation reaffirms the intrinsic value of forests and the urgent need for their protection. As custodians of our natural heritage, it is incumbent upon us to adopt a balanced approach that reconciles developmental imperatives with environmental sustainability. By prioritising forest conservation, India can pave the way for a greener, more resilient future. It is imperative for stakeholders to work in tandem to uphold the sanctity of our forests and ensure their preservation for generations to come.

Source: [The Hindu](#)

UPSC Mains Practice Question

Q. Discuss the significance of the Supreme Court's recognition of forests as national assets and major contributors to financial wealth in India. Highlight the implications of this recognition on environmental conservation policies and sustainable development strategies.