

Editorial

Highest Importance: Lowest Priority

“Environment sustainability is not an option but an imperative. Clean air, pure water, conservation of forests and wild life and generation of greenery are the essentials for a healthy environment. Prevention of degradation of land, controlling floods and droughts, preventing desertification, conservation of fragile eco-system, prevention of deforestation, conserving bio-diversity and mitigating water and air pollution all present challenges for planners and policy makers.”

Nice words, isn't it? This is quoted from a government document “Mid-term Appraisal: Tenth Five Year Plan – Part II, Chapter 14, pp: 429-443. Let us see if this rhetoric matches with the deed. I quote from another government document given to me in one of the meetings of the 11th Five Year Plan:

Plan	Year	Allocations in Crores	% of the National Plan
6 th	1980-85	692.50	0.07
7 th	1985-90	1,859.00	1.03
8 th	1992-97	4,910.00*	1.13
9 th	1997-02	7,336.00**	0.84
10 th	2002-07	14,344.00***	0.94

* Swaminathan Committee appointed by the Planning Commission, Government of India, recommended allocation of Rs. 9,950 crores for the 8th Plan.

** Mukherjee Committee of the Planning Commission recommended allocation of Rs. 26,752 crores for the 9th Plan for ensuring covering of 33% area in 20 years.

*** The National Forestry Action Plan aimed at having 33% of land area under forest/tree cover in 20 years. To achieve this, the Ministry of Environment and Forests, in 1999, requested allocation of Rs. 27,256 crores for 10th Plan.

The MoEF got 0.94% of the National Plan of the Government of India in the 10th Five Year Plan for protecting the environment and almost 20% in the land of the country that is officially under forest cover (the state governments have their own budgets). Let us see what the forests provide to us. Intangible benefits of forests and biodiversity run in billions, perhaps hundreds of billions of rupees – though I do not have statistics for this. To give you some examples of the intangible benefits of forest and wild areas: most rivers originate from the forests; forest cover regulates stream flow and rain water; forests and grasslands help in ground water recharge and soil conservation; vegetation cover does CO₂ fixation and provides us with clean air; forests, grasslands, mangroves and wetlands provide a plethora of medicines and genes for crops. The tangible benefits of the forests are: 70% of all rural and 20% of urban fuel energy comes from forests, 40% of the green fodder (grazing, lopping and cutting) comes from forests, 80% of all rural medicine and a large volume of non-timber products come from forests. All of these activities support livelihood in the rural sector. Millions of people visit national parks and sanctuaries every year. The state governments earn crores of rupees from forests through harvest of timber, Forest Corporations, and auctions of Minor Forest Products. The Forestry sector employs millions of people in rural India.

Environmental sustainability is certainly not an option which can be delayed for future generations. Future generations and civilizations *are* sustained by environmental sustainability. Can we sustain and protect the environment when the Planning Commission (and the Government) gives it a low priority?

In this age of globalization, WTO, Millenium Development Goal, agriculture subsidies, Davos and Doha, will someone in India calculate the benefits, both tangible and intangible that our forests and wildlife provide to us? With an economist for a Prime Minister, and Secretary of Environment and Forests, this is perhaps the only language they would understand.

Discussions on the 11th Five Year Plan are ongoing with each ministry putting up their demands of funds. Let us take the mandarins of the Planning Commission to a national park before they decide fund allocation for the MoEF.

Perhaps, clean air, pure water, unpolluted streams, song of the Malabar Whistling Thrush, and innocent alarm calls of a skittish Cheetal doe would change their heart.

Perhaps, taking them to the forest in central India, where the Chambal river originates, would change their outlook to nature.

Perhaps, a morning walk on a lonely nature trail in the thick jungles of Arunachal Pradesh would change their mind.

Perhaps, in the 11th Five Year Plan the MoEF will get 5% of the National Plan, which the MoEF rightly deserves.

Perhaps, the statement quoted at the starting of this editorial would not remain just an empty rhetoric.

Perhaps....!

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