

Plantation, ecological restoration go hand-in-hand

Anoop Jaipurkar
@timesgroup.com
1 July, 2016

If Pune: The lush green hills dotting the city are not green enough.

A closer look at the flora on these hills reveals that the slopes have been converted into grassland (monoculture) — not right from the bio-diversity perspective. Most of their natural vegetation has been lost.

The hills need a variety of trees and shrubs grown there for hundreds of years. "In Pune, hills should experience mixed forest — 'mosaic of habitats' like dry deciduous forest and savana dominated with grasses. In most areas, soil is poor or rock is exposed. In such a situation, plants won't thrive. It needs huge external inputs, which becomes difficult in case of mass plantation drives," said Ketki Ghate, an authority in ecological restoration.



Pic: Anoop Jaipurkar

Digging trenches on hills will help retain water and check erosion

The state government is ready to execute its ambitious drive to plant two crore saplings across the state on July 1. State forest minister Sudhir Mungantiwar said, "Soil definitely needs intervention. We are using technology to generate compost, but the issue needs much more attention, which we will

give in the years to come. Right now, we want to involve more and more people in the drive and explain the importance of trees. Ideally, Maharashtra needs 400 crore trees. This will give you an idea of how tough the job is. Hence, the focus is on people's participation."

Thousands will do their bit

To help the 1.5 crore saplings in forest areas survive, we will give the responsibility of every 1,000 saplings to a family, which will get paid under the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme. The remaining 50 lakh trees will be looked after by citizens

Sudhir Mungantiwar |
MAHARASHTRA FOREST MINISTER

for the July 1 drive. But little has been thought about the soil, which has to support the new trees.

"Only plantation will not help create forest. To improve our green cover, we need vegetation on open, may be, barren lands. For this, ecological restoration of the

given habitat is a must. If you plant 100 trees in unsuitable soil, they won't survive. Your intentions are good, but the method is wrong," said Ghate.

The soil around the city was created over thousands of years. But it turned barren only in a few hundred years. Several patches of soil do not support life at all. Harsh summer increases soil temperatures up to 60°C. At this temperature, all bacterial life and the soil's germination capacity is lost.

"Presence of grass gives rich biomass and does not let the harsh sun rays reach the soil. But we consider grass to be bad and remove it. This is where we have lost the plot. Everything in nature exists with a cause. We are only supposed to create a balance be-

tween its various components. Hence, the need for ecological assessment before taking up plantation," said Ghate.

"While growing trees is good, ensuring they survive the onslaught of nature's vagaries is more important," said Shailesh Gite, a young professional who takes part in plantation drives.

Ravi Purandare of Green Hills, who has helped transform Hanuman tekd, said, "The PMC gave us six tonnes of dry leaves. We shredded them, and added urea and microbes to prepare compost. Adding this mix to the soil helped trees grow better."

India has about 27% wasteland. By implementing ecological restoration methods, most of this land can have flora and fauna of its own. "Then we may not have to plant trees at all," said Ghate.

