

'Everyone is aghast.' India's move to weaken forest protections outrages conservationists

Saturday 19 August 2023, by [GUPTA Tanvi Dutta](#) (Date first published: 1 August 2023).

Government claims legislation is needed to fight climate change, but conservationists say it could accelerate deforestation

Conservation scientists fear more than one-quarter of forests in India could lose legal protection under controversial legislation that the nation's Parliament could approve as early as this week.

The legislation amends India's flagship 1980 Forest Conservation Act. The government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi says it will help India meet its commitments to combat climate change by planting trees, and "eliminate ambiguities" in rules that govern how officials legally define forests and regulate their use.

But researchers and others worry the measure—which has triggered nationwide protests—will irrevocably transform India's landscape. They say the amendments will open forests to development, harm biodiversity, and weaken the rights of Indigenous people.

The legislation "is ecocide," says conservation biologist Ravi Chellam, CEO of the Metastring Foundation, which makes policy relevant data publicly available. "People are gobsmacked by the brazenness of it all."

Since Modi's government first floated the legislation in 2021, it has attracted widespread criticism. Conservationists oppose provisions that would remove protection from vast swaths of forest that have not been officially recognized in government documents. They say the proposal would also make it easier to mine in protected areas, and build infrastructure related to ecotourism, including zoos and resorts.

Human rights activists [have decried language](#) that would reduce the need for developers to consult with or gain prior consent from forest-dependent communities, including Indigenous groups. Advocates also [raised alarm](#) about provisions allowing the government to waive reviews of projects that are within 100 kilometers of India's border and deemed critical to national security. In some border states with high biodiversity, that exception would cover nearly all forested land.

"One could argue this is not just an Amendment but an entirely new Act," [more than 400 ecologists wrote last month to India's environment minister](#) after the government moved to present an unchanged version of the bill to Parliament. They asked the minister to delay any vote pending consultation with experts.

On 26 July, however, Parliament's lower house took less than 20 minutes to pass the bill after almost no debate. As *Science* went to press, Parliament's upper house was expected to follow suit.

The legislative rush has left many conservationists demoralized. "Things are already very bad with Indian forests," says Ghazala Shahabuddin of the Ashoka Trust for Research in Ecology and the

Environment. Now, “whatever little we have remaining is under threat.”

Analysts estimate nearly 200,000 square kilometers of forest will lose legal protection under the bill. At particular risk, Shahabuddin and others say, are forests managed by local communities, which rarely enjoy formal recognition. The law will “ride roughshod” over the rights of people who live in and use these forests, the ecologists who signed last month’s letter forecast. For example, it “does not provide any clarity” about how officials should consider existing land rights claims filed by Indigenous groups, says Pranav Menon, an anthropology graduate student at the University of Minnesota and legal adviser to the Van Gujjar Tribal Yuva Sangathan, a youth-led Indigenous group.

The law continues a legislative trend of “reducing people to just rubber stamps,” Shahabuddin says, noting that Parliament has taken other steps to weaken public participation in environmental decisions.

India’s environment ministry [argues](#) the regulatory changes will support efforts to plant new forests and use trees, which absorb and store carbon, to fight climate change. And it asserts any loss of existing forests will be made up by creating new plantations elsewhere.

But, “The devil is in the details,” Chellam says, noting that if single-species plantations replace more diverse forests both biodiversity and the climate could suffer. “Functional, dynamic ecosystems will do a far better job of carbon sequestration than species-poor tree plantations,” he says.

Once finalized, the new law will likely face legal challenges. “The Supreme Court will be flooded” by lawsuits questioning the law’s constitutionality, predicts Debadityo Sinha, a climate and ecosystems specialist at the Vidhi Centre for Legal Policy. One advocacy organization, the Environmental Support Group, [is already arguing](#) that the measure was “proposed in fundamental violation” of rules requiring coordination with India’s Ministry of Tribal Affairs.

In the meantime, researchers and conservationists are bracing for the worst. The policy changes are “so short-sighted,” Chellam says. “Everyone is aghast, not just about their lives, but about the lives of future generations of Indians.”

Tanvi Dutta Gupta

[Click here](#) to subscribe to ESSF newsletters in English and/or French.

P.S.

Science

<https://www.science.org/content/article/everyone-aghast-india-s-move-weaken-forest-protections-out-rages-conservationists>