

Forests: Nature at your service

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The year 2011 has been declared as the UN International year of forest and forest ecosystems. Supporting this, United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) declared that forest: nature at your service will be the theme for this year's World Environment Day. Forest is an intricate system made up of plants and trees that protects bio diversity, providing home to 80% of terrestrial bio diversity and improving the quality of life forms in earth. It is estimated that foreign trade in forest products earned \$375 billion in 2005, besides plants and trees in forest consume carbon dioxide and provide clean air during the process of photosynthesis.

Unending activities of deforestation, industrialization, and urbanization have an exponential impact on environment resulting in various devastating consequences such as climate catastrophes, loss of bio diversity, loss of human life, properties

and assets. Forests come to the rescue of human beings by acting as lungs of earth reducing global pollution. This year's environment day will be a bigger celebration compared to environment day 2010 in view of mass participation and registration of people in UNEP activities from 112 countries.

Forests cover 31% of total land area providing home to nearly 300 million people. Nearly 1.6 billion people earned their livelihood security in forest. In addition, forests also provide home and protection to animals and birds. Therefore, it is essential to protect the existing forest cover from deforestation and forest degradation for reducing the phenomenon of global warming which threatens our planet earth.

In the baseline scenario i.e., business as usual scenario, CO₂ concentration weight would increase from 27 Gt in 2005 to 62 Gt in the year 2050, corresponding to an increase from 379 parts per million molecules of dry air (ppm) in the atmosphere to 550 ppm of CO₂ in the same period as against the natural range of 180 ppm

to 330 ppm. Similarly atmospheric concentration of methane gas has also increased from 775 parts per billion (ppb) molecules of dry air in 1990s to 1732 ppb in 2005 as against the normal range of methane between 320 ppb and 790 ppb.

Difference between deforestation and degradation: UNEP defines deforestation as the reduction of forest cover viewed by the loss of trees whenever commercial logging and large scale forest fire take place. Hence, maintenance of the present forest cover as well as afforestation is essential.

Degradation of forest: Degradation is defined as the loss of quality of forest in terms of vegetation layer, soil quality, flora and fauna rather than forest coverage.

Besides the advantages of forest such as providing home to biodiversity, source of livelihood to 16 millions of people, source of foreign exchange, it occupies a pivotal role in our struggle against global warming phenomenon. Forests consume carbon dioxide from the atmosphere and

release oxygen; thereby it locks carbon dioxide as carbon sink. As a resource base, forests provide a number of products such as timber, fuel, rubber, medicinal plants and a host of other useful products. In terms of service, increasing forest cover provides good quality water and ensures water availability in river systems. In this process, they help us to control soil erosion, storm and flood disasters.

UNEP advocates Payment for Ecosystem Services (PES) for mobilization of public- private investment in ecosystem management. PES is an initiative of voluntary transaction to compensate land owners for providing ecosystem services to society such as carbon storage, watershed protection and biodiversity conservation.

REDD Programme for Afforestation: UNO has launched resource efficient, low carbon, employment intensive collaborative initiative with 29 developing countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America to stabilise global warming by reducing green house gas emission so as to avoid an increase of 2° Celsius in surface temperature. In

the process of increasing afforestation, developing countries earn carbon credit also through financial assistance from advanced countries.

For instance in Nigeria, the World Bank has identified 750 Clean development Mechanism (CDM) projects which if implemented, the country could earn 1 billion euros, besides providing millions of jobs to the jobless youth. However, Cross River state has been implementing REDD Scheme for the past few years increasing the forest cover in the state, thereby earning millions of dollars. Hence, Governments should conceive policies and implement strategies to increase forest cover in collaboration with stakeholders such as local communities and non-governmental organizations for getting the best services and products that forests provide to humanity.

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