

PRESS RELEASE
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Civil society leaders press upon the need for a synergistic approach to prevent the growing number of forest fire incidences in Maharashtra

Nagpur, July 5, 2023: In the backdrop of the rising forest fire incidences in Maharashtra, leading civil society members from across the state came together to discuss their concerns and recommendations in a ‘Civil Society Dialogue’ organized by the International Forum for Environment, Sustainability and Technology (iFOREST) in Nagpur. The dialogue titled ‘Forest fires, Climate Change and NTFP Collection in Maharashtra’ aimed at improving the understanding of the nature of forest fires, their leading causes, and impact, as well as at deliberating on mitigation and control measures.

Maharashtra has been consistently reporting some of the highest forest fire incidences in India for several years now. According to the Forest Survey of India (FSI) data, 22,052 (SNPP-VIIRS) forest fire incidences were reported in the state during the last forest fire season (November 2021 to June 2022) which were the third highest in the country, while 34,025 incidences were reported in the previous season (November 2020 to June 2021) which were the fourth highest in the country.

“The rising incidences of forest fires are immensely concerning and especially so in Maharashtra. In the last three forest fire seasons, the state accounted for around 10% of the country’s total forest fires. They are not only adversely affecting the state’s rich biodiversity and forest resources but are also contributing towards the climate crisis,” explained Mandvi Singh, Programme Director, Energy and Climate Change, iFOREST.

The civil society members at the dialogue, who represented a mix of organisations working on issues pertaining to forest conservation, wildlife protection and rural and forest-dependent communities, unanimously voiced the pressing need for arresting the growing number of forest fires in the state. There was also a consensus about the need to acknowledge the role and potential of community-level engagement in forest fire management practices.

Sawan Bahekar, President, SEWA Gondia pointed out that the increasing incidences of forest fire in Maharashtra were extremely alarming given how areas like Gadchiroli had some of the highest number of forest fire incidences in the country. Further, he pointed to the need for region-specific set-ups for the management of fire.

While acknowledging the linkages between non-timber forest produce (NTFP) collection and forest fires, Dilip Gode, Executive Director at the Vidarbha Nature Conservation Society said, “it is important to not carelessly heap blame onto communities for the spread of forest fires without taking into account the commercial pressures on NTFPs like tendu patta.” He further highlighted the importance of promoting sustainable harvesting of NTFPs in the context of the environmental damage that some NTFP collection practices lead to.

“There is a need for dedicated research efforts to understand the causes of forest fires”, said Jayant Kulkarni, Director-Conservation, Wildlife Research and Conservation Society. He stressed the need for a “collaborative effort between various stakeholders to control forest fires.”

At present, there is a limited understanding of the factors responsible for these fires, which further restricts focused action. While significant investments from the government have been made for improving fire tracking and alert systems, the control and management systems remain inadequate and lacking. As pointed out by the community members, forest fire management practices need to be strengthened, and this cannot be done without acknowledging and promoting the role of communities in this context.

“In a bid to contribute towards the understanding of forest fires in the state, we have undertaken a study focusing to understand the linkages between NTFP collection practices and forest fires. We decided to focus on tendu not only because it is among the largest NTFPs being produced, but because there is a known practice of using fires for procuring fresh green, good-quality leaves. Also, the leaf is ultimately being used for manufacturing bidis which are estimated to cost the nation Rs 800 billion in illnesses and early deaths,” explained Prerna Sah, Senior Research Associate at iFOREST.

Using satellite data from NASA and ISRO, the study finds that tendu-producing areas appear to have a very high susceptibility to forest fires in Maharashtra. It estimates that forest area burnt due to tendu-linked forest fires during the 2011-2021 period was around 4,767 sq km, almost one-third of the state’s total burned area during the period. These fires are estimated to have contributed nearly 3.9 million mt of carbon emissions in 2021, which is equivalent to the emissions contribution of nearly 1.6 million cars.

“Our study finds preliminary but strong evidence that there is a significant environmental impact of tendu leaf collection practice. We have also found through the survey that while tendu is a good source of supplementary income for the dependent communities, it has not helped address the underlying poverty among forest communities,” said Mandvi Singh.

iFOREST has surveyed 385 tendu-collecting households in seven villages in Chandrapur district to find that the average earning of tendu-dependent households was around Rs 8,000 for 13 days of collection. “Relative to the economic contribution to the income of forest communities, the environmental costs are very high.”

During the meeting, iFOREST also launched state-focused factsheets detailing these study results. These findings are part of a larger study undertaken for three major tendu-producing states of Chhattisgarh, Odisha and Maharashtra.

A government-backed exploration and promotion of sustainable NTFP collection practices are crucial in the present scenario. Meanwhile, synergistic efforts from all stakeholders are needed to address this urgent matter, especially communities, which are at the forefront of any forest fire mitigation and prevention action.

About iFOREST

International Forum for Environment, Sustainability & Technology (iFOREST) is an independent non-profit environmental research and innovation organisation. Set up by a group of renowned scientists and environmentalists, it seeks to find, promote and scale-up solutions for some of the most pressing environment–development challenges. It endeavours to make environmental protection a people’s movement by informing and engaging the citizenry in important issues and programs.

Dr. Ragnath Mashelkar, Nation Research Professor and former Director-General of Council of Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR) is the Chairperson of iFOREST.

Chandra Bhushan, the CEO & President of iFOREST, is one of India’s foremost public policy and environment experts.

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