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FEATURE ARTICLES**FOREST FIRE: A BURNING ISSUE****By Dr. Kodira A. Kushalapa IFS (Retd.)**

In India, like in many tropical countries, forest fires are a regular occurrence in places where the rainfall is low (2000 mm or less per annum), with large gaps between the monsoons. In our State forests, fires are seen between January and June, or till the onset of monsoon.

Forest fires have occurred in Chamundi Hill, Bandipur, Nagarahole and the neighbouring forests. It is common in forests where due to lack of moisture, plants shed leaves during summer (dry season) to prevent evapo-transpiration and to survive till the first showers. These dry leaves are spread all over the forest floor and are highly combustible. These fire-prone forests are called dry deciduous and scrub forests and require adequate precautionary measures to prevent and combat forest fires and the consequent damages to forests.

Forest fires pose a threat to the entire regime of flora and fauna causing extensive damage by destroying young regeneration of useful tree species, germinated seeds, eggs of snakes and terrestrial birds, young ones of other small game which are unable

to make a speedy escape.

Grasses are burnt, which would have otherwise provided the much needed fodder to herbivorous wild animals like elephants, spotted deer, sambhar and bisons during this critical period called "pinch period."

Forest fires cause air pollution by releasing carbon dioxide and other noxious gases such as carbon monoxide, methane, etc. and increases atmospheric temperature (global warming) and ozone layer depletion besides promoting rapid drying of forest soils making it hard for plants to penetrate its roots and survive. The tanks and streams go dry. The fallen leaves normally decompose and enrich forest soil with organic nutrients but fire destroys them.

Over the years, due to repeated forest fires, only fire-hardy and non-browsable invasive weed species like Lantana, Eupatorium, Parthenium etc. come up, suppressing useful fodder species, grasses and bamboos. Thus forest fires are one of the causes of deforestation and degradation of our forests.

Decrease in natural habitat

Most forest fires are man-made and mostly incendiary and very rarely occur by natural causes like lightning etc. The Karnataka Forest Act-1963, Section 24 prohibits setting fire in Reserve Forests, kindling any fire or even leaving any fire burning. There are similar provisions for protected forests, village forests and district forests also but is it possible to enforce the law when the entire forest is open and honey-combed by encroachments (cf. Forest Tribal Act), tribal hadis, free grazing, connecting roads?

It is also reported that about 40 per cent of the lower posts of ground staff are vacant, making it impossible to supervise efficient fire protection measures. The Forest Department has created Village Forest Committees (VFCs) to co-ordinate forest protection and management but they are not effective as the villagers themselves have to depend on the adjoining forests for their daily requirement of fuel-wood, small timber and for grazing their cattle. Sufficient incentives are also lacking.

Forest dwellers set fire to forests around their habitation to drive away wild animals, especially snakes, and to clean the forest floor off dry leaves to facilitate collection of non-timber forest products like flowers, fruits, seeds, gums and resins etc. from valuable trees. Honey collectors set fire to trees having bee hives to drive away the bees and collect honey.

Gomalas (village grazing grounds) are set on fire in summer to induce sprouting of grasses during the pre-monsoon showers. However, early or pre-monsoon showers considerably reduce the fire damage.

Most of the forest fires in our forests are ground fire (surface fire), burning the fallen dry leaves and other tender ground flora. Trees like Mathi, Honne, Teak etc. have thick bark (an adaptation?) and ground fire hardly affects them. Crown fires are rare here, except occasional burning of the crown of dead trees or dried bamboo clumps, but common in Himalayan pine forests.

Before the onset of fire season, several precautionary measures are taken to prevent damages due to accidental and deliberate forest fires. The Forest Department used to burn the entire forest floor earlier in the months of November-December to reduce inflammable dry leaves, grasses etc., but the practice has now been discontinued.

Now, they clear all growth on either side of the roads and boundary lines of forests and burn the debris so that accidental fire could be prevented from spreading inside the forests. How far they are effective is anybody's guess! At vantage points like hill tops, tree-top machans, fire watchers on daily wages are engaged and stationed during the fire season to watch for any fire occurrence through indications of rising smoke, and to immediately communicate to the ground staff through wireless network.

Forest fires are extinguished manually by beating the fire with green leaf brooms unlike in developed countries where helicopters are used to sprinkle or shower water over burning areas, which is very expensive. Fire tenders cannot reach the spot due to steep terrain and absence of roads.

Several NGOs have come forward to create awareness about fire damages through lectures in schools and colleges, slide shows in public and by organising jathas etc. VFCs are involved in fire fighting activities inside the forests and others are motivated. The Central Government also provides annual grants to prevent forest fires in State forests.

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