

**PRESS RELEASE**  
**Bhubaneswar, Odisha | May 9, 2023**

**Civil society leaders press upon the urgent need for synergetic action for controlling forest fires in Odisha**

**Bhubaneswar, May 9, 2023:** In the backdrop of the rising forest fire incidences in Odisha, 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 Bhubaneswar. The dialogue titled ‘Forest fires, Climate Change and NTFP Collection in Odisha’ aimed at improving the understanding around the nature of forest fires, its leading causes, and impact, as well as at deliberating on mitigation and control measures.

Odisha has been consistently reporting some of the highest forest fire incidences in India for several years. According to the Forest Survey of India (FSI) data, 22,014 forest fire incidences were reported in the state during the last forest fire season (November 2021 to June 2022) which was fourth highest in the country, while 51,968 incidences were reported in the previous season (November 2020 to June 2021) which was highest in the country. News reports indicate that the ongoing season is also likely to witness similar trends of high numbers.

“Nealy 43 per cent of Odisha’s forests is classified as moderately to extremely fire prone. The rising incidences of forest fires are exacerbating the state’s vulnerability to climate change, as well as negatively impacting the state’s rich biodiversity and forest resources,” explained Mr Chandra Bhushan, one of India’s leading environmentalists and Chief Executive Officer, iFOREST.

The civil society members at the dialogue, who represented a mix of organisations working on issues pertaining to forest conservation, wildlife protection and community support, unanimously voiced the pressing need for arresting the growing number of forest fires in the state.

“It is very important to understand what constitutes forest fires in Odisha in terms of its nature and characteristics and then explicitly acknowledge the traditional knowledge of the communities in forest fire management” said Mr Giri Rao, Executive Director, Vasundhara.

Dr Biswajit Mohanty, Secretary, Wildlife Society of Odisha, also called for improved understanding of forest fires stating that, “While there are forest fires ignited by natural causes, major contribution of human action cannot be denied. The government is currently not focused on this. There is an urgent need for strengthening efforts towards forest fire control and involve the community more deeply.”

Well-known Herpetologist, Dr Sushil Kumar Dutta, explained that “forest fires have an adverse impact on smaller animals and reptiles too. However, the focus is only on larger animals like the tiger. Fires not only cause deaths of these smaller animals and reptiles, but also affect crucial food systems.”

At present, significant investments from the government have been made for improving fire tracking and alert systems, however the control and management systems remain inadequate and lacking. There is also limited understanding of the factors responsible for these fires, which further restricts focused action.

“In a bid to improve the understanding about 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, because it is among the largest NTFPs being produced in Odisha and there is a known practice of using fires for procuring fresh green, good quality leaves. Also, the produce is ultimately being used for manufacture bidis which is estimated to cost the nation Rs 800 billion in illnesses and early deaths,” explained Mandvi Singh, Programme Director, Energy and Climate Change at iFOREST.

Using satellite data from NASA and ISRO, the study finds that tendu-producing areas appear to have very high susceptibility to forest fires in Odisha. It estimates that forest area burnt due to tendu-linked forest fires during the 2011-2021 period was around 3,018 sq km, almost one-third of the state’s total burned area during the period. These fires are estimated to have contributed nearly 3.8 million mt of carbon emissions in 2021, which is equivalent to the emissions contribution of nearly 1.52 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 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, Programme Director, Energy and Climate Change at iFOREST

iFOREST has surveyed 381 tendu-collecting households in eight villages in Angul district to find that the average earning of tendu-dependent households was only Rs 2,195 for 9 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 Odisha, Chhattisgarh and Maharashtra.

A government-backed exploration and promotion of sustainable NTFP collection practices is crucial in the present scenario. Meanwhile, synergistic effort from all stakeholders are needed to address this urgent matter.

## 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 peoples’ 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.

For any queries, please reach out to:

Mandvi Singh

Programme Director, Energy and Climate Change

International Forum for Environment, Sustainability & Technology (iFOREST)

+91 9650623107 | [mandvi@iforest.global](mailto:mandvi@iforest.global)

