

PRESS RELEASE
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Civil society leaders press upon the need for community-centred bottom-up approach to prevent the growing number of forest fire incidences in Chhattisgarh.

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

Chhattisgarh has been consistently reporting some of the highest forest fire incidences in India for several years, and if one notices the trend over the last couple of years, the incidences have only been increasing. Nearly 45 per cent of Chhattisgarh’s forests is classified as moderately to extremely fire prone. According to the Forest Survey of India (FSI) data, 25,792 forest fire incidences were reported in the state during the last forest fire season (November 2021 to June 2022) which were the second highest in the country, while 38,106 incidences were reported in the previous season (November 2020 to June 2021) which were the third highest in the country.

“The rising incidences of forest fires are immensely concerning and especially so in Chhattisgarh where a study shows that forest fires have increased three-fold over a 17-year period. 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.

Dr SL Swamy, Professor at the Indira Gandhi Krishi Vishwavidyalaya, noted in his keynote address that the incidences of fire were increasing at an alarming rate in Chhattisgarh. He pointed out, “90% of forest fire incidences are anthropogenic in nature. There are many factors responsible for this including the collection practices associated with NTFPs like mahua and tendu. The need for sustainable NTFP collection practices to that fires can be controlled and the livelihood of the communities also ensured.”

While acknowledging the linkages between tendu collection and forest fires, Ramesh Sharma, National Coordinator, Ekta Parishad, said, “forest preservation and conservation necessitates the strengthening of the Forest Rights Act and its implementation.” He emphasised, as other speakers and participants had done, the need for community-led interventions in the prevention and mitigation of fires.

“There is a need to integrate indigenous knowledge in forest fire management practices in the state because it is these local communities that are at the forefront of any prevention and mitigation measures”, said Namita Mishra, State Unit Head, Foundation for Ecological Security highlighting the “invisibility” of this knowledge at the government level. She stressed the need for communities to be able to take decisions about their forests and ecosystems.

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 Purna 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 Chhattisgarh. It estimates that forest area burnt due to tendu-linked forest fires during the 2011-2021 period was around 6,120 sq km, almost 40% of the state’s total burned area during the period. These fires are estimated to have contributed nearly 6.4 million mt of carbon emissions in 2021, which is equivalent to the emissions contribution of nearly 2.6 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 381 tendu-collecting households in seven villages in Korba district to find that the average earning of tendu-dependent households was around Rs 5,600 for 6 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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