Compensatory Afforestation and Forest Governance

What is the issue?

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- There were protests against the decision to fell more than 16,000 full-grown trees in Delhi recently. Click here to know more
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- This has brought attention to the issue of compensatory afforestation and the availability of land for it.
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What are the larger concerns?

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- In forested and tribal-dominated states large tracts of forests are being diverted for infrastructure projects.
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- This was however on the condition that afforestation will compensate for forest loss.
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- The user agencies will in turn pay money.
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- However, “polluters pay” model may not resolve environment- and land-related concerns.
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- **Compensation** - Forest Conservation Act, 1980 and Indian jurisprudence led to the Compensatory Afforestation (CA) concept.
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- In 1999, it was proposed that the “area” of forest lost be compensated by afforesting an “equal area” on non-forest land.
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- If non-forest land was not available, then degraded forest land that was “double the area of forests lost” had to be afforested.
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- Eventually, a price tag was put on forests and its loss was deemed to be compensated financially.

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- **Implementation** - Earlier the state forest departments were made responsible for afforestation.
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- But despite money being deposited by the user agency, CA was not taking place on the ground.
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- This led to the setting up of the Compensatory Afforestation Planning and Management Authority (CAMPA).
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- The money deposited thus came under the purview of the Centre.
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- CAMPA at national and state levels managed these funds.
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- A CAG audit report found that 11 out of India's 30 states could not use more than 50% of the funds released to them by the centre.
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- The report also added that it was difficult to procure land for compensatory afforestation.
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- This is because the state forest departments lacked planning and implementation capacity.
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- The situation is more worrisome for states with high tribal populations.
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- **Principle** - Later, in 2016, the Compensatory Afforestation Fund (CAF) Act was enacted.
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- The whole principle reduced a "forest" to a "commodity which acquires certain area on the ground".
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- The whole focus has shifted to spending money.
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- The ecology, biodiversity and ecosystem services of the forests lost relevance.
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- Data indicate that ecologically unviable but commercially popular species like Eucalyptus are promoted.
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- The need of the hour is to improve forest clearance processes, approvals and basic issues of forest governance.
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Source: Business Standard

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