Draft National Forest Policy - 2018

What is the issue?

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- Ministry of Environment, Forests and Climate Change has recently released the “Draft National Forest Policy, 2018” for public comments.
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- This is a positive as a new forest policy that is in tune with the changed realities was long overdue.
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How has India’s forest policy evolved?

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- Currently, the “National Forest Policy of 1988” is the primary document that drives India’s forest outlook.
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- This dates back to the times when climate change was a fuzzy concept, and even before economic liberalisation was undertaken.
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- While Forest Rights Act was passed in 2006, a comprehensive new forest policy that covers the new evolving concerns was needed.
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- Hence, the present draft on climate change concerns has factored in climate change concerns and management plans forest and wildlife.
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- It also talks of “safeguarding the livelihood of forest dependent people” and envisions raising the country’s forest cover from 25% to 30% of its land area.
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What are the concerns with the draft forest policy?

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- It persists with the methodological weakness of the “Indian Forest Survey Reports” of the past 30 years that conflate plantations with forest cover.
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- It talks about improving the productivity of forest plantations by the intensive scientific management of commercially important species.
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- While it does mention native plants like bamboo, it also stresses the need for plantations of exotics like eucalyptus and casuarina.
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- These provisions seems to disregard the compelling evidence that plantations are no substitute for natural ecosystems that with good biodiversity.
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- Ecologists vouch that nurturing natural ecosystems comprising of indigenous species are key for ecological sustainability and for climate change mitigation.
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- Also, a 2015 study in Nature had cautioned against “promoting intensive forestry for maximum timber yield under the flag of climate change”.
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How effective are forests in addressing climate change?

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- While the exotic vs. indigenous species debate is raging, some researchers claim that mere regeneration of forests isn’t enough to check global warming.
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- The efficiency of the “carbon cycle in forests” (which varies from forest to forest), is said to be a key factor for climate change mitigation.
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- India has largely lacked nuanced studies to map forests and their carbon cycle potential and the draft policy doesn’t offer a roadmap to address these.
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- Such concerns need to be addressed while finalising the new forest policy.
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Source: Indian Express

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