Felling of Trees in Delhi

What is the issue?

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- Protests have erupted in Delhi over the felling of over 16,000 trees in government redevelopment yards.
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- Authorities argue that the numbers are exaggerated and in any case, they would plant more trees than are being felled.
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What is the government policy?

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- In India’s countryside, forest lands underwent diversion for “non-forest purposes”.
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- These have been compensated for, through a series of laws.
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- The Forest Conservation Act of 1980 was the foremost one.
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- The policy culminated in the Compensatory Afforestation Fund (CAF) Act of 2016.
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- It assumes that planting large number of trees would compensate for the loss.
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- However, how effectively will this redress cutting down natural wilderness is uncertain.
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- On the other hand, compensatory afforestation largely exists on paper.
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Will planting new trees really help?

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- Clearly, compensation is reduced to a matter of counting trees.
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- But an old forest is a whole lot more than the sum of its trees.
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- Plants, fungi, microbes, insects and animals are all part of a living jungle ecosystem.
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- Recreating this community is not an easy task, as it takes decades.
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- Also, soil with microorganisms and mycorrhiza inhabiting the humus takes 30,000 years to build up.
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What are the governance issues?

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- The sole agency for carrying out compensatory afforestation is the Indian Forest Department.
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- Rewilding is possible, but it needs tools, knowledge and techniques.
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- But, no Forest Department in India has any experience or track record of doing any ecological restoration work of any kind.
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- It is also not taught to foresters in their training.
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What is the case with Delhi?

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- **Authority** - For compensatory afforestation, it is the Forest Department which implements the planting schemes.
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- It is charged with compliance under the CAF Act.
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- But, in a city like Delhi, the Forest Department is confused of what role to play.
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- It is confused in the centre of power and with so many horticultural agencies competing for its natural turf.
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- The Forest Department thus plays little role in managing the green areas of Delhi.
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- This is the case even with the Central Ridge, which is nominally under its control.
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- **Afforestation** - In Delhi, the land that is made available for afforestation is mostly least arable and degraded.
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- Also, small plots are crammed with large number of saplings which are not even native trees.
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- Clearly, they cannot be relied upon or sustained, once watering and care are withdrawn.
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- Delhi is one of the cities with toxic air quality in the world.
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- Given this, any development that adversely impacts Delhi’s air quality needs a reassessment.
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Source: Indian Express

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