Flaws in the "Draft Forest Policy – 2018"

What is the issue?

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- A truly effective forest policy for India must be based on facilitating community-managed forests.
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- But the 'Draft Forest Policy - 2018', which is intended to replace the current "National Forest Policy (1988)" undermines this.
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What is the current status of Forests?

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- The status of our forests is reported every two years in the State of Forest Reports (SFRs).
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- Since 1987, 15 such reports have been published, the latest being SFR 2017, published in February 2018.
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- SFRs have multiple sets of data on growing stocks (the sum total of volume of all trees in the forest), and the forest cover within the recorded forest areas.
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- All data are not available for all the years, but there is enough to enable a coherent analysis on the health of our forests.
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- SFR 2017 recorded India's total forest cover as 0.71 million sq. Km, which is 21.54% of the country's geographical area.
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- Out of this, dense forests (more than 40% canopy cover) are 0.41 million km2 and open forests (10-40% canopy cover) 0.3 million km2.
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What are the trends in Forest since NFP-1988?

- **The Aim -** NFP 1988 was enacted to "preserving the remaining natural forests" and for "increasing substantially the forest/tree cover in the country".
- It debarred the private sector from raising plantation on forestland and encouraged them to source raw materials directly from farmers.
- It promoted substitution of wood with other materials.
- It also envisioned ownership rights over trees for forest dependent weaker communities for bettering conservation efforts.
- **Spread -** In 1989 (immediate aftermath of the NFP-1988), the total forest cover was recorded as 0.64 million km2, i.e., 19.47% of the geographical area.
- While an area of 0.38 million km2 had dense forest cover and 0.26 million km2 was open forests in 1989, it has increased considerably from there.
- Hence, India's forest cover has increased by 68,139 km2 in the last 30 years, which is equal to 1.5 times the area of Haryana.
- But, most of the increase (70%) has been in the category of open forests, which are largely degraded forests.
- Since 2011, State of Forest Report (SFR) has also been counting forested areas outside the "Recorded Forest Areas (RFA)", which are government protected.
- Forests outside recorded areas (on private lands), marked about 36,000 Km2 increase (Contrastingly, recorded forests decreased by 19,800 Km2).

- **Quality -** Growing stock is an indication of forest health, and there has been a general decline in "growing stock", for decades now, implying degradation.
- It has reduced from 4781.4 million cubic metre (m3) in 2002 to 4218.4

million m3 in 2015—a decline of 12% in a little over a decade.
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- This could be because of the diversion on more than 10,000 km2 of forests for mining, irrigation, power and other infrastructure projects.
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- **Conclusion -** The health of our forests has declined significantly.
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- Most of the increase in dense forests is just plantations on private land and changes in dense forest cover inside RFAs are insignificant.
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- The increase in total forest cover is also largely because of trees grown outside forests, mostly under social and farm forestry.
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- Recorded forests have experienced significant degradation in the last 30 years, which has caused significant losses to ecological diversity of the country.
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Why did NFP-1988 fail?

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- Increasing tree cover outside RFAs and promoting agro-forestry is a positive step, but much needs to be done to realise the full utility of agro-forestry.
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- While the policy of substituting wood with plastic and metals have been successful, but the goal of preserving natural forests has failed miserably.
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- Vesting forest rights in forest-dependent communities is being resisted tooth and nail by the forest department, which is not in good vein.
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- Notably, "Forest Rights Act – 2006" took the matter out of the hands of the foresters, thereby enabling some form of community ownership.
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- It the NFP of 1988 didn't fail, but its implementation did.
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How does the current draft policy (NEP-2018) look?

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- We need a forest policy that recognises the role of forestry in climate change

and the potential of people to grow, manage, and use forests sustainably.
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- Unfortunately, the draft NFP 2018 fails to do this, and has many controversial provisions like bringing private sector into forest management.
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- It also seeks to reassert control of the forest department over the forests by undermining the Forest Rights Act, which would be a regressive step.
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- All these give the indication that India hasn't woken up from the colonial mindset in forest management (which seeks to isolate forest dwellers).
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- Significantly, many countries worldwide have become mere facilitators in forest governance by handing over control to their native forest dwellers.
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- Nevertheless, some good objectives like promoting agro-forestry and reversing the wood-substitution policy are also there in the draft policy.
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Source: Financial Express

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