



Largest green zone in south Bengal, Jungle Mahal's forest cover shrinks by more than half: Study

Sal (*Shorea robusta*) is a key species in the laterite soil of Jungle Mahal, particularly in the four Jungle Mahal districts — Jhargram, West Midnapore, Purulia and Bankura, other traditional trees include Kendu and Mahua, along with mango and jackfruit

Snehamoy Chakraborty | Published 05.06.25, 10:00 AM



A metalled road passes through the dense sal forest in Jhargram

File picture



Increasing deforestation, agricultural expansion and infrastructure development have caused a 59.43 per cent decline in the dense forest cover of traditional sal trees between 1992 and 2022 in Jungle Mahal, according to a study conducted by a research scholar and his guide.

The study involving the largest green zone in south Bengal raises serious concerns ahead of World Environment Day on Thursday.

The study involved the use of satellite imagery and ground verification across 130 forest pockets in the Jhargram and West Midnapore districts. The decline in forest cover has led to significant ecosystem degradation in the region, say geography professor Pravat Kumar Shit at the Raja NL Khan Women's College (Autonomous) in West Midnapore and his PhD student Soumen Bisui, who recently received his doctoral degree. Shit and Bisui jointly did the research.

"We will celebrate World Environment Day once again on Thursday, while the forest area, considered the lungs of south Bengal, continues to face a severe crisis due to declining dense forest cover over the past three decades," said Shit.

"Despite efforts by the forest department to plant trees, they have failed to restore the ecosystem, as they have largely relied on monoculture plantations like eucalyptus and acacia, instead of native sal trees," Shit added.

Sal (*Shorea robusta*) is a key species in the laterite soil of Jungle Mahal, particularly in the four Jungle Mahal districts — Jhargram, West Midnapore, Purulia and Bankura. Other traditional trees include Kendu and Mahua, along with mango and jackfruit.

During the survey, the researchers travelled across vast areas of Jhargram and West Midnapore to assess the extent of forest cover loss, attributed largely to development activities aimed at improving livelihoods.

For example, in Belia village of Jamboni block in Jhargram, the forest area was 1.92sqkm in 1992. According to 2022 measurements, the coverage had shrunk to just 0.05sqkm. The study found that this decline was driven by the expansion of agricultural land, roads and human settlements. Similarly, in Deluha village of Midnapore Sadar block, the forest cover declined from 1.20sqkm in 1992. It shrunk to 0.58sqkm in 2022 because of similar causes.

"The population has increased, which has led to deforestation for building homes, roads, bridges and other infrastructure. Though it is illegal, forest-dwellers were compelled to clear sal trees for agriculture to survive. Government-led deforestation occurred to accommodate development projects. While these may be necessary, reforestation was not carried out adequately to compensate for the loss of sal forests," Shit said.

The decline in sal forest cover has also negatively affected the livelihoods of forest-dependent communities, particularly tribal populations.

Mangal Mahato, a resident of Salboni village in Jhargram and one of the many forest dwellers interviewed for the study, said: "Even 20 years ago, I was fully dependent on forest resources such as sal leaves and mahua fruits. Now that resources have dwindled, more people depend on them. It's impossible to survive on forest resources now, except for collecting a bit of firewood."

The study recommends that the forest department prioritise reforestation with traditional native tree species instead of monoculture plantations like eucalyptus or acacia.

Birbaha Hansda, Bengal's forest minister and a native of Jhargram, said her department has stopped planting monoculture trees and initiated reforestation efforts using traditional sal trees.

"Recognising their ecological impact, we have completely stopped planting species like eucalyptus. Over the past three years, we have been planting sal and other native species that align with the region's ecosystem," Hansda said.