

Tuesday, Mar 19, 2024

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Heat, aridity, clear skies: why forests are already ablaze in the Nilgiris

In South India, most forest covered areas of Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu have seen fire incidents over the past week.

Written by [Anjali Marar](#)

Bengaluru | March 19, 2024 07:55 IST





The Bambi Bucket is especially helpful in fighting wildfires that are difficult or impossible to reach from the ground. Around the world, helicopters are frequently commissioned to fight forest fires.

For almost a week, forest fires have been raging in the Coonor forest range in the Nilgiris in Tamil Nadu. On Sunday, the Indian Air Force joined the ongoing firefighting efforts of the state forest department, deploying an Mi-17 V5 helicopter to conduct multiple “Bambi Bucket” operations that dumped some 16,000 litres of water on the fires.

The Bambi Bucket, also called a helicopter bucket or a helibucket, is a specialised container that is suspended by cable under a chopper, and which can be filled by lowering into a river or pond before being flown above a fire and discharged aerially by opening a valve at the bottom of the bucket.

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How common are forest fires in India?

November to June is considered to be forest fire season in India, with hundreds of thousands of small and large fires burning every year, especially from February

onward as summer approaches. April-May are usually the worst fire months across the country.

The biennial India State of Forest Report (ISFR) published by the Forest Survey of India (FSI) under the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change recorded in its 2019 report that more than 36% of India's forest cover was prone to frequent fires. About 4% of the forest cover was 'extremely prone' to fire, and another 6% was 'very highly' fire prone (ISFR 2019).

Globally, about 3% of the total forest area, or about 98 million hectares of forest, were affected by fires in the year 2015, mostly in the tropical regions.

Where do the most forest fires in India occur?

According to the FSI, severe fires break out in dry deciduous forests, while evergreen, semi-evergreen, and montane temperate forests are comparatively less prone to fires. The forests of Northeast India, Odisha, Maharashtra, Jharkhand, [Chhattisgarh](#), and Uttarakhand are the most vulnerable to fires during the November to June period.

In March 2023, large bushfires raged in [Goa](#), triggering an investigation into whether they were "man-made". In 2021, a series of forest fires broke out in Uttarakhand, Himachal Pradesh, Nagaland-Manipur border, Odisha, Madhya Pradesh, and Gujarat, including in wildlife sanctuaries.

How has the forest fire situation been this year?

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Over the past one week, the highest number of forest fires have been reported from Mizoram (3,738), Manipur (1,702), Assam (1,652), Meghalaya (1,252), and Maharashtra (1,215), as per FSI data.

Satellite data of Monday, generated by Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) tools, showed that forest fires have been on an uptick since early March along the Konkan belt in Maharashtra, south-coastal Gujarat along Gir Somnath and Porbandar, southern Rajasthan and adjoining south-western districts of Madhya Pradesh, coastal and interior Odisha, and adjoining Jharkhand.

In South India, most forest covered areas of Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu have seen fire incidents over the past week.

Are forest fires in South India unusual?

Some forest areas in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana are fire-prone. However, according to the FSI, forests in southern India are comparatively less vulnerable to fires, as the vegetation type is mainly evergreen or semi-evergreen. That said, Tamil Nadu has been reporting wildfires in its forests in recent years.

What is the reason for the fires this year?

Forest fires have man-made as well as natural causes. A majority of forest fires are a result of human carelessness like discarded cigarettes, camp fires, burning of debris, and similar other processes. Amongst natural causes, lightning is the most common originator.

Forest fires need a conducive atmosphere to spread. Hot and dry temperatures and high tree density are some of the factors that help the spread of forest fires.

This year, high aridity, above-normal day temperatures, clear sky conditions, and calm winds during the early phase of the summer season are some of the contributory factors for the spike in forest fire incidents in southern India.

Last month was exceptionally hot over Southern India in particular. This February was South India's hottest since 1901, and January was the fifth warmest in more than a century.

Over the past two months, the recorded maximum, minimum, and mean temperatures have remained above-normal over the southern states, which has helped build the heat load over the region well before the onset of the summer season. As a result, there has been an early availability of dry biomass in these forests since the winter season itself.

The IMD has warned of the prevalence of Excess Heat Factor (EHF), a value that predicts the chances of a heatwave over a region, to be significantly higher than normal over western Andhra Pradesh and neighbouring Karnataka. Maximum temperatures touched 40 degrees Celsius here last week, unusual for mid March.

In the absence of rain and prevailing high temperatures, the IMD has classified almost all districts of southern India under 'mild' aridity.

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First uploaded on: 19-03-2024 at 07:55 IST

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India Updated: March 19, 2024 07:23 IST