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KARACHI: Pai forest in dire straits

By Faiza Ilyas



KARACHI: The truncated stems of the trees felled in Pai forest indicate that there has been no check on deforestation in the protected game reserve.

KARACHI, Sept 2: The once-flourishing Pai forest has fallen victim to the acute, decade-long shortage of water caused by the irrigation department's officials' failure to check malpractices committed by influential locals, illegal logging, the mass chopping of trees, encroachment and poaching.

It is alleged that these activities, which have severely damaged the biodiversity of the forest, are taking place with the connivance of the very personnel that were supposed to have been protecting the game reserve.

The degraded forest is located about five kilometres from the town of Sakrand in district Nawabshah. Today, it has been stripped of roughly half its plantation depth and there are large tracts of barren land. The extent of the

destruction, caused jointly by the lack of water and human interference, is alarming since not only do most trees suffer stunted growth, there are also a great many bare patches and visible signs of arson. In addition to the loss of flora, the area has also lost much of its once-diverse fauna.

Officials of the World Wide Fund for Nature-Pakistan, who are working at the site under the Indus for All Programme, claim that the forest has been in this state for many years. "It isn't that there have been fresh assaults," said Usama Anwar, the WWF-P site manager at Nawabshah. "There has been no change in the forest's status and no matter how many tube-wells are installed, no rehabilitation plan can be successful unless the sanctioned 30 cusecs of water are regularly released for the forest." The forest is currently fed by 14 tube-wells, many of which remain under repair at any given time. Originally, Pai forest formed part of a riverine ecosystem and depended on the annual inundation of the River Indus.

When protective embankments were constructed along the banks of the river in the early 20th century, the forest was cut off from the riverine tract and became dependent on the sanctioned supply of irrigation water, which was not only inadequate but also infrequently released. This has, over the years, continuously damaged the forest and the wildlife it supported.

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Wildlife experts consider the situation a great loss to Sindh, which has already lost a substantial forest area out of its total 2.78 million acres, though official records still show the land denuded of trees as forest. Large-scale deforestation has increased poverty while climate change is worsening with each passing day.

Poverty-hit villages

The destruction of the forest's fragile ecosystem has meanwhile translated to increased poverty for thousands of villagers who, until about 15 years ago, were the direct beneficiaries of the forest's by-products. Villagers hold government officials – including staff members of the irrigation, forest and wildlife departments, and the police force – directly responsible for the predicament into which they have been pushed.

Nusrat Hussain, a village elder of Alam Khan Jalbani, told Dawn that the forest “used to be the people's lifeline.”

“It provided us wood and tonnes of honey and glue every year, which we sold in the market,” he reminisced. “It was also an excellent grazing ground; the level of prosperity was such that each family used to have about a hundred buffaloes and over a thousand goats. The forest used to be like a beautiful garden, echoing with bird calls all the time.”

Times have changed for the worse for Hussain and the other people who live in the surrounding villages. The area was hit first by a long period of drought, and then in subsequent years by the acute shortage of irrigation water. These conditions still prevail and the forest has been rendered partially barren.

“There is no advantage to living near the forest now,” said Hussain. “Our only source of income is what little we earn from farming. First the drought and later the manipulation of water supplies by landlords have led to our miseries.”

The people living in the villages surrounding Pai forest also accused officials of allowing the mass felling of trees. “Wood is not only chopped down and taken away, trees are also simply poisoned to death,” they said. “Some sort of acid is used to burn the roots so that the illegal logging can be justified.”

Mismanagement and incompetence

The current condition of Pai forest reflects the poor performance of three government departments: alongside the irrigation department's failure to ensure the supply of sanctioned water, there is a lack of resources and mismanagement on part of the wildlife and forest departments.

A forest area of over 4,000 acres is protected by a mere 12 guards who are unarmed. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that about 229 acres have been encroached over the years and that poaching and hunting activities flourish unchecked.

“Every year, the wildlife department issues hunting licenses but issues no guidelines to regulate the hunting,” said Anwar of the WWF-P. “Neither does it take any measures to monitor hunting parties. Given such serious lapses, the task of protecting wildlife is extremely difficult, if not wholly impossible.”

The forest constitutes a natural habitat for a variety of wildlife species, including hog deer, Asiatic jackals, jungle cats, porcupines, wild boar and a large number of snake and bird species. This diversity is threatened equally by the loss of habitat and illegal hunting.

Pai forest was declared a reserve forest in 1883 and later given the status of a game reserve. It

had a total area of 5,901 acres of which 1,015.4 acres were transferred to the department of agriculture in 1959 while 140 acres were given to the army for the establishment of a cantonment, which has so far not materialised.

The village people alleged that the army was making money by cultivating forest land and leasing it out to influential locals.



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