

# 'Van Panchayats, local villages underutilised in conservation'

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DEHRADUN: Amid ongoing forest fires in the state, environmentalists have emphasised the importance of engaging local villagers in forest conservation efforts to mitigate the impact of wildfires.

Experts suggest that involving more villagers as first responders through govt agencies could effectively address the issue as a pro-active step before it escalates into a crisis.

Uttarakhand has the country's oldest forest management systems known as Van Panchayats (VPs). Established in the hills in 1931 under the Indian Forest Act, 1927, VPs were formed to empower villagers to oversee and protect forests in their vicinity. However, their authority has dwindled over the years due to successive amendments to the Act. Currently, an estimated 4.52 lakh ha of forest area falls under the jurisdiction of 11,217 VPs.

Commenting on the potential of VPs to enhance conservation efforts in Uttarakhand, Shekhar Pathak, renowned historian from Kumaon, said, "The forest department alone cannot safeguard forests, nor can local communities do it in isolation. Collaborative efforts involving all stakeholders are essential. The department must actively engage Van Panchayats in forest conservation efforts, as they have been nurturing these forests for years."

Suresh Bhai, founder of environmental NGO Himalaya Bachao Abhiyan, told TOI, "Ignoring locals could jeopardise not only forest protection but also preservation of the mountains. Forest fires pose a significant threat to Uttarakhand and excluding communities or weakening their rights will undermine conservation efforts."

Expressing concerns, Suresh Bhai added, "Forest fires are often ignited by the timber mafia or individuals seeking to encroach upon forest land. During such incidents, members of Van Panchayats can serve as the eyes and ears of the forest department."