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Water central theme in future forest mgmt

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Kozhikode: Realizing the critical nature of hydrological services provided by forests, especially in the post-flood scenario in the state, the forest department has decided to make water (hydrology) as a central theme in state's future forest management.
The department will incorporate 'water focus' while revising working plans of 11 territorial forest divisions and management plans of 24 protected areas and sanctuaries, which are due.

The water-forest agenda will find its reflection on the ground in steps for replacing teak plantations in disaster prone areas and ecosensitive areas, stopping new plantations of water guzzling acacia and eucalyptus trees and their gradual phasing out, acquisition of mangroves and enhanced focus on curbing spread of invasive species.

In line with the policy, the government is also mulling acquisition of some lands which are critical to enhancing the hydrological function of the forests belonging to private estates and rehabilitation of non-tribal settlements in those lands to outside the forests.

The policy shift is significant as historically the focus of forest management had changed from timber during the Colonial period to industrial foresty and environmental and forest protection during the subsequent decades.

Forest minister K Raju said that it has been decided to give enhanced focus on the forest-water interactions in the state's forest management as forests play an important role in ensuring water availability.

"Giving water focus to forest management can result in positive spinoff in the form of reducing human-wildlife conflict. As part of the move, we have decided not to go for large planting of acacia and eucalyptus plantations," he added.

Principal chief conservator of forests and head of forest force (HoFF) P K Keshavan said that the department is in the process of preparing a plan on how to convert the existing industrial plantations into natural forests.

"Industrial plantations do not contribute much to the hydrological cycle whereas natural forests are vital to the water cycle and water quality as forests enable increased infiltration of water and reduces overland runoff. Also, forests can help to increase recharge of aquifers and sustained release of water to the streams thereby helping maintain water supply during the dry periods," he added.

Chief conservator of forests (working plan and research) Pramod G Krishnan said that water retention capacity of Kerala forests is now just limited to just 30% of its optimal capacity due to several factors like the degradation of forests and disturbances in the forest ecosystem.
He said that after the two back to back floods in 2018 and 2019, there has been a lot of rethinking going on how we can factor in forest management practices which could help in flood-mitigation and disaster-reduction.

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