

OPINION

Pakistan's journey to ecosystem restoration

THE month of June — heart of every eco-the month marks (WED) — undoubtedly the

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holds a special standing in the conscious person as the 5th of World Environment Day most prominent dedicated day

to revitalize our commitment for collective efforts to mitigate and safeguard the environment which is facing serious threats. To our delight, it was announced earlier in the year that Pakistan is the host for WED 2021 celebrations. Considering the theme of this year titled 'Ecosystem Restoration', it is only fitting that Pakistan has been chosen to host the prestigious occasion as the recent strides in reclaiming the country's deteriorating ecosystems have been momentous.

The current government's efforts to revive and expand forests all over the country under the ongoing Ten Billion Tree Tsunami project have been applauded globally. Since the commencement of Pakistan's plantation drive in 2019, various reforestation and afforestation campaigns have been carried out throughout the country in an effort to improve the overall conservation of the Protected Areas, along with to contribute towards climate change mitigation. Although it has been globally established that efforts under the WED 2021 theme will take much more than just planting trees to combat climate change, Pakistan's massive plantation initiative is still admirable with its impact-oriented outcome as a complementing arm in restoring ecosystems.

Among the variety of ecosystems Pakistan has, off the top of my head, coastal and marine ecosystems come to mind which have been critically affected over the years and are in need of serious interventions. In 2019, an assignment took me to Karachi, the coastal metropolis of Pakistan, and the state of public beaches and the sea I saw was abysmal. I was comparing it to the much cleaner image I had of them when I was first there as a kid back in 2004. During my stay, I got to see the popular Sea View beach several times, and the things that stayed the same in all those visits were the presence of piles of trash and untreated sewage openly flowing from under the sidewalk onto the beach and into the ocean. What is saddening is that the only quick escape into the nature for the people of the city resembles and smells like a landfill, with countless dead fish washed up on the beach - now along with the 'COVID waste' and hazardous hospital waste, posing a threat to tourists and life under water.

The inadequacy and inefficiency of the wastewater treatment plants and their administrators allows colossal amounts of untreated municipal and industrial sewage from the largest city of Pakistan to end up polluting the ocean, a resource on which the whole country depends. A diploma in waste-water treatment I recently did has allowed me to understand the intricacies of water chemistry, and it was shocking to learn that many coastal waters of Karachi city are concentrated with heavy metals and organic contaminants which have originated from the city, rendering the waters uninhabitable for marine life. Industries along the coast, ports and harbours are the culprits in this regard as they have the ease of disposing off their effluents due to their proximity to the ocean, coupled with the lack of observance of environmental regulations. Increased economic activities along the coast such as ports in Gwadar and Karachi, including the increasing maritime traffic are also contributing to the disruption of marine ecosystems.

Similarly, considering the broader theme of ecosystem restoration, over-fishing is an issue that needs to be addressed by regulating the formal and informal fishing industry along the coast, promoting sustainable fisheries. The complex nexus that these issues form will be resolved when their interconnection and underlying reasons are effectively understood. Another reason our marine ecosystems are deteriorating is the loss of prized mangroves. Cutting of trees for wood and land recovery for invasive development projects has led to a widespread disappearance of mangroves, which are known to be 'shock absorbers' in case of tsunamis, and host exceptional biodiversity. The aforementioned national tree-plantation project has been helpful in this regard as indigenous mangrove varieties have been planted over a vast area in an attempt to recover the lost glory of these coastal features. Similar attempts would lead to the restoration of marine ecosystems, also contributing to the objectives of Sustainable Development Goals and the UN Decade of Ocean Science for Sustainable Development.

Personally, I appreciate the efforts of our government to restore ecosystems across the country, which has led to the honour of hosting this year's World Environment Day. However, the need to employ other socio-political, economic, ecological and technical solutions to restore and preserve these ecosystems still very much persists. I believe that with this step in the direction of safeguarding our environment, we will be able to progress to recover from anthropogenic and climate change-driven losses. The current decade has been declared the UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration, and will be ending in 2030, which is also the deadline for the SDGs; it is anticipated that preservation and restoration efforts will see a surge, globally as well as nationally. Along with institutions, we, as human beings and individuals who are reliant on the services these ecosystems provide, it is our obligation to engage in discourse and advocate the protection of our environment through personal efforts and lifestyle modifications. We can call it our ethical duty, religious responsibility, the need of the hour, or whatever floats the boat.

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