

# Amid Covid-19, India playing a dangerous game with ecology

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## DECCAN HERALD

**Who wants to listen to Doomsday talk at a time when we are obsessed with ensuring economic growth**



Harini Nagendra,

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As the second wave of Covid sweeps across India, it has become increasingly obvious that we are playing a dangerous global game. As we cut deeper into the world's last remaining forests, and take over grasslands, wetlands and other rare ecosystems, we are

blasting away the buffer between nature and people – creating the facilitating conditions for new pandemics to emerge. A new global study, led by researchers from the Key Biodiversity Areas Secretariat at Cambridge, shows that only 2.8% of the world's habitats are ecologically intact, functioning the way they are intended to. The global map of intact ecosystems prepared by these scientists shows major gaps in India. Apart from some pockets in Ladakh and the North-East, at least according to this study, there seem to be no ecologically intact habitats left in the rest of the country.

### **Read | Scientists find only 3% of land areas unblemished by humans**

But who wants to listen to Doomsday talk at a time when we are obsessed with ensuring economic growth? In Goa, one of the state's most beautiful forest stretches, in Mollem National Park, is set to lose at least 60,000 trees for a national highway, a rail track and a power line. Cutting a line through a forest may seem to be a small intervention, worth it because of the impetus to development that better transport networks provide. But having a road or railway cut through a forest is disastrous for wildlife. Animals are killed in vast numbers by road traffic and collisions with trains. The railway line that cuts through Mollem National Park will also enter Karnataka, impacting the Kali Tiger Reserve. The railway line will take coal, brought in all the way from ships coming from Australia to Goa's Mormugao Port, to steel plants, running on coal power, in Karnataka and Maharashtra.

Very close to this railway line is the proposed Hubballi-Ankola railway line (now in hiatus because of a High Court order), which aims to take iron and manganese ore from Bellary to west coast ports in Karnataka and Goa. This proposal, which was opposed by many conservation groups, will fragment the corridor between Bedthi Conservation Reserve and Kali Tiger Reserve. It will also impact the adjacent Dandeli Hornbill Conservation Reserve. A new railway line is also being proposed between Talaguppa, Sirsi, Siddapura and Hubballi, an area covered by dense forests rich with biodiversity.

Meanwhile, in Nagarhole Wildlife Sanctuary, thousands of Jenu Kurubas, an Adivasi tribe of honey collectors, are protesting against attempts to evict them from the sanctuary. The Jenu Kurubas are indigenous groups who have made the forests of the Nilgiris their home for generations. Ecotourism, with roads, safaris and other economically beneficial activities are being encouraged in the sanctuary, but traditional communities are seen as enemies of conservation.

Ironically, the global study on ecologically intact habitats finds that a large number of the world's remaining ecologically intact habitats are in areas inhabited by indigenous communities. Indigenous communities like the Jenu Kurubas, with their relatively low-impact ways of living in forests, play an important role in maintaining the ecological integrity of these areas in ways that 'eco' tourists, mining companies, and railway lines certainly do not.

It is untrue to say, as most proponents of these railway lines, roads and industrial expansion do, that issues like biodiversity and forest rights are sacrifices that are essential for ‘development’ and ‘progress’. We have eroded the protective buffer of ecology to such an extent that any further impact can rapidly lead to unexpected ‘tipping points,’ where development, economy and livelihoods can collapse along with biodiversity. And such a collapse can happen very quickly, as the past year has shown us.

New science collated by the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services, an international science body established by more than 100 different national governments across the globe, shows a clear connection between habitat loss and the likelihood of new pandemics and emerging diseases. Controlling deforestation and maintaining habitat integrity is an essential part of maintaining public health – just as essential as it is to develop vaccines and diagnostic kits.

We seem to be doing just the opposite.

## NEXT STORY



Eshe Nelson,

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For the second time in less than a decade, Elvira Nabiullina is steering Russia’s economy through treacherous waters.

In 2014, facing a collapsing ruble and soaring inflation after barely a year as head of the Central Bank of Russia, Nabiullina forced the institution into the modern era of economic policymaking by sharply raising interest rates. The politically risky move slowed the economy, tamed soaring prices and won her an international reputation as a tough decision-maker.

In the world of central bankers, among technocrats tasked with keeping prices under control and financial systems stable, Nabiullina became a rising star for using orthodox policies to manage an unruly economy often tethered to the price of oil. In 2015, she was named Central Bank Governor of the Year by Euromoney magazine. Three years later, Christine Lagarde, then the head of the International Monetary Fund, effused that Nabiullina could make “central banking sing.”

**Also Read: [For Ukraine doctors, treating injured Russians a necessary evil](#)**

Now it falls to Nabiullina to steer Russia’s economy through a deep recession and to keep its financial system, cut off from much of the rest of the world, intact. The challenge follows years she spent strengthening Russia’s financial defenses against the kind of