

CLIMATE CHANGE IMPACT ON MANGROVE ECOSYSTEMS IN INDIA'S COASTAL REGIONS

*Chime Youdon
12 October 2020*

Abstract

Mangroves are amongst the world's most fragile ecosystems. The impacts of global climate change such as rising sea-level, altering weather patterns, and acidifying oceans are putting mangrove forests at high risk. In addition, threats from human exploitation pose significant concern for their regeneration and restoration. This paper begins with an introduction to the unique features of mangroves and discusses their benefits for coastal communities in India. It thereafter goes on to look into their vulnerability to climate change as also to the impact of ostensible urban 'development' activities. The paper concludes by discussing the strategies and measures that must be taken at a policy level to conserve and protect this crucial ecosystem.

Importance of Mangroves

Mangroves form a unique ecosystem that exists along the coastline, on the margin between land and sea in tropical and subtropical areas.¹ Mangroves are considered to be amongst the most productive, diverse, and crucial bio-resource in the coastal environment. They have tremendous socio-economic and ecological value as they provide goods and services to human societies and coastal and marine species. For instance, they offer several vital ecosystem services such as regulating water quality, providing a breeding ground for fish species, and are a source for fuelwood, charcoal, timber, and wood chips. They have several unique features, such as aerial breathing roots and extensive supporting roots.² They play a significant role in stabilising the shoreline and providing physical protection by serving as a natural ecological barrier against ocean currents, storms, and cyclones. They also help in flood-attenuation since their roots and organic matter trap sediments and act as sponges, absorbing floodwater.³ As a result of these characteristics, they protect the most vulnerable coastal communities from the devastating impacts of climate change-induced sea-level-rise and extreme-weather events.

¹ Ankush Saddhe and Ashok et al. "Assessment of Mangroves from Goa, West Coast India using DNA barcode." *Springer Plus*, 5, No 1 (2016): 1554. <https://springerplus.springeropen.com/articles/10.1186/s40064-016-3191-4>

² Duke NC and Alongi DM, eds., *Tropical Mangrove Ecosystems (Coastal and Estuarine studies)* (Washington: American Geophysical Union, 1992).

³ UNISDR/UNDP, "Status of Coastal and Marine Ecosystem Management in South Asia", Inputs of the South Asian Consultative Workshop on "Integration of Disaster Risk Reduction and Climate Change Adaptation into Biodiversity and Ecosystem Management of Coastal and Marine Areas in South Asia" held in New Delhi on 6 and 7 March 2012. New Delhi: UNDP.

Mangrove forests also store large amounts of carbon — more than any other type of forest. Therefore, they play an important role in mitigating climate change. However, due to rampant human exploitation in coastal regions and the accelerating impacts of climate change including rising sea-levels, altered weather patterns, and the acidification of the oceans, the health of mangrove forests around the world is deteriorating at an alarming rate.⁴

Mangrove Cover in India

Mangrove forests cover just 0.1 per cent of the world’s land area and just 15 countries account for more than 75 per cent of the total global mangrove forest area.⁵ India has a total mangrove cover of 4,975 sq km, which is 0.15 per cent of the country’s total land area but amounts to 3 per cent of the global mangrove forest area and 8 per cent of Asia’s mangrove forest area.⁶ Of this, about 60 per cent is located along the country’s eastern coast (abutting the Bay of Bengal), 27 per cent is located along the western coast (abutting the Arabian Sea), while the remaining 13 per cent is found in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. As depicted in **Figure 1**, the mangrove-distribution among maritime states differs quite extensively.

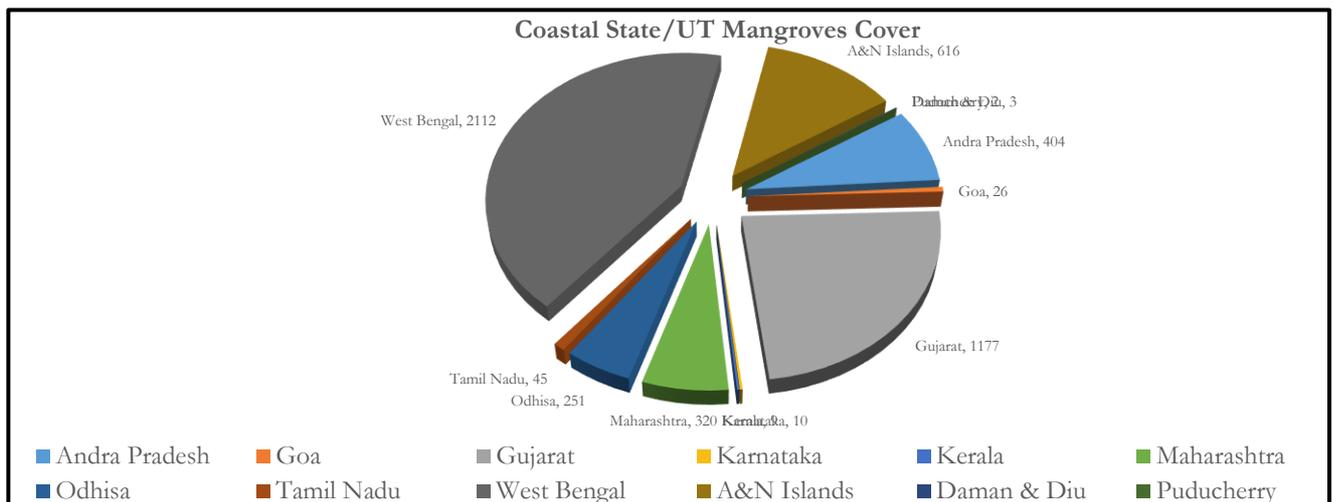


Fig 1: Mangrove Cover in Different States and UTs

Source: India State of Forest Report 2019

West Bengal has the largest mangrove forest and accounts for 42.45 per cent of the total mangroves cover, followed by Gujarat with 23.66 per cent. The mangrove forest cover of other maritime states is marginal compared to that of these two states. Daman and Diu, for instance, accounts for just 0.03 per cent (3 sq km), Puducherry 0.06 per cent (2 sq km), Goa 0.52 per cent

⁴Benjamin Halpern, Kimberly Selkoe, Fiorenza Micheli, and Carrie Kappel, “Evaluating and Ranking the Vulnerability of Global Marine Ecosystems to Anthropogenic Threats”, *Society for Conservation Biology*, 12, No 5 (2007): 1301-1315.

⁵Jorge Ramos, “On World Mangrove Day, a New Strategy to Protect the World’s Most Important Ecosystem”, *Conservation International*, 26 Jul 2017, <https://www.conservation.org/blog/on-world-mangrove-day-a-new-strategy-to-protect-the-worlds-most-important-ecosystem>

⁶Government of India, Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change, Forest Survey of India “India State of Forest Report 2019”, Chapter 3, <https://fsi.nic.in/forest-report-2019?pgID=forest-report-2019>

(26 sq km), Kerala 0.20 per cent (9 sq km), Karnataka 0.205 per cent (10 sq km), and Tamil Nadu 0.09 per cent (45 sq km).

Within the states themselves, the density of mangrove forests is not uniform, as very dense mangrove comprises 1476 sq km (29.66%) of the mangrove cover and are limited to just three coastal states, namely, West Bengal (996 sq km), Andaman and Nicobar Islands (398 sq km) and Odisha (81 sq km) (see Table 1). Globally, too, mangroves are disappearing at a rate of 1 to 2 per cent per year, which is even faster than coral reefs and tropical rainforests.⁷ Since the 1950s, about 50 per cent of the mangroves biome has degraded due to inadequate protection and extensive alteration of their habitat.⁸ At the current rate, all the world's mangroves will be lost by the end of this century.⁹ India itself has lost as much as 40 per cent of its mangroves during the last century alone.¹⁰ India had a mangrove cover of about 6,749 sq km (the fourth largest mangrove area in the world),¹¹ which dropped by nearly 59.18 sq km between 1972-75 and 1980-82, as per the 2019 report of the National Remote Sensing Agency, India.¹²

Table 1: Mangrove Cover across India in 2019

Ser	State/UT	Very Dense	Moderately Dense	Open	Total (sq km)
1.	Andhra Pradesh	0.00	213.00	191.00	404.00
2.	Goa	0.00	20.00	6.00	26.00
3.	Gujarat	0.00	169.00	1,008.00	1,177.00
4.	Karnataka	0.00	2.00	8.00	10.00
5.	Kerala	0.00	5.00	4.00	9.00
6.	Maharashtra	0.00	88.00	232.00	320.00
7.	Odisha	81.00	94.00	76.00	251.00
8.	Tamil Nadu	1.00	27.00	17.00	45.00
9.	West Bengal	996.00	692.00	424.00	2,112.00
10.	A&N Islands	398.00	169.00	49.00	616.00
11.	Daman & Diu	0.00	0.00	3.00	3.00
12.	Puducherry	0.00	0.00	2.00	2.00
Total		1,476.00	1,479.00	2,020.00	4,975.00

Source: India State of Forest Report 2019¹³

⁷ Alongi D. M., "Mangrove Forests: Resilience, Protection from Tsunamis, and Responses to Global Climate Change," *Estuarine, Coastal and Shelf Science*, 76, No 1 (2008):1-13.

⁸ Feller, I. C. et al. "Biocomplexity in Mangrove Ecosystems", *Annual Review of Marine Science*, 2, (2010): 395-41.

⁹ NC Duke, JO Meynecke S Dittmann, et al., "A World Without mangroves?" *Science*, 317, No 5834 (2007): 41-42.

¹⁰ Govt. of India, *Mangrove in India. Status Report, Ministry of Environment and Forest, Govt. of India*, 1987.

¹¹ Sudam C. Sahu, HS Suresh, IK Murthy, and NH, Ravindranath, "Mangrove Area Assessment in India: Implications of Loss of Mangrove", *Journal of Earth Science and Climate Change*, 6, No 5 (2015): 1-7.

¹² RP Envis, "Forestry and Forest Related Livelihoods", State of Forest Report, 2015-2017, Forest Research Institute, Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change, Government of India,

http://frienviis.nic.in/Database/Mangrove-Cover-in-India_2444.aspx, http://frienviis.nic.in/Database/Mangrove-Cover-Assessment-2019_2489.aspx

¹³ Envis RP on Forestry and Forest Related Livelihoods, FRI, Dehradun, MoEFCC, Govt of India, http://frienviis.nic.in/Database/Mangrove-Cover-Assessment-2019_2489.aspx

The density and diversity of mangroves are affected by temperature and moisture to a very significant degree.¹⁴ Increasing temperature causes heat stress and increase in ocean salinity. The problem of salinity of water is exacerbated by rising sea-levels, as also by other factors such as changes in the flow of fresh water from rivers, and, the growth of human activities such as shrimp-farming and expansion of salt pans along the coast.¹⁵ In fact, the expansion of salt pans along the coast is one of the major causes of decline of mangrove species. For instance, Gujarat is the single largest producer of salt in India and contributes 80 per cent to the total marine salt production of the country. Large portion of mangrove areas were leased to industries for the creation of salt pans. As a result, the salinity level in Gujarat's soil and water is very high and this is reducing the natural regeneration of mangrove forests. The State government of Gujarat has recorded that over 14 species of mangroves have already become extinct.

*“No major rivers, except Indus with its reduced annual flows, pour fresh water in the Gulf of Kachhbh. As a result, only hardy species like Avicennia Marina, with high salt tolerance, have survived. Similarly, in the Gulf of Khambhat, fresh water inflows from some of the major rivers like Sabarmati and Mahi have reduced due to construction of dams for irrigation in the upstream areas”.*¹⁶

Despite the cases of degradation of mangroves in Gujarat, the 2019 edition of the “India State of Forest Report” (ISFR) states that the mangrove forests cover area in Gujarat (1,177 sq km) has increased “substantively” — by about 750 sq km — since 1987, which is almost a three-fold increase. In general, government data shows a long-term increase in mangrove cover in India, particularly in the category of open mangrove forests. This is perplexing, to say the least. There is some possibility that localised conservation efforts are at least partially responsible for this apparent reversal, but the dichotomy remains largely unaddressed. A more likely reason for the seemingly increasing trend could be ineptitude or inaccuracies in the methods used for mapping and monitoring of mangroves. Even though satellite data analysis and geographical information system are the most effective methods available for monitoring “forest cover”, they cannot be used to gauge the health of the forests. Assessing the health of mangroves would require additional field surveys to complement satellite data. Coastal states are generally the most industrialised, and, in such states, the reclamation of mangrove areas to support human settlements, aquaculture, the rampant discharge of industrial effluents and toxic substances, are all major factors that lead to destruction and degradation of mangrove health and cover. Most coastal states that are vulnerable to the adverse impacts of climate change, such as Tamil Nadu, West Bengal, and the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, are the very ones that continue to experience loss of mangrove cover.

¹⁴ Bhumika N Vaghela, Mona G Parmar, Hitesh A Solanki, Bhagirath B Kansara, Sumit K Prajapati and Manik H Kalubarme, “Multi Criteria Decision Making (MCDM) Approach for Mangrove Health Assessment using Geo-Informatics Technology”, *International Journal of Environment and Geoinformatics (IJECEO)*, 5, No 2 (2018).

¹⁵ Paolo Vineis, Queenie Chana, and Aneire Khanab, “Climate Change Impacts on Water Salinity and Health”, *Journal of Epidemiology and Global Health*, 1, No 1 (2011): 5-10.

¹⁶ Gujarat State Project Management Unit, “Marine Protected Areas”, National Centre for Marine Bio-Diversity, Forest and Environment Department, Government of Gujarat. <http://www.geciczmp.com/know-our-coast.aspx>

Major Challenges Facing Mangroves: Climate Change and Natural Factors

The mangrove forest ecosystem in general shows “*exceptional morphological and physiological adaptation skills to counter the environmental and natural stress associated with their intertidal habitat*”.¹⁷ However, sea-level rise is amongst the more critical of the various factors that contributes to the degradation of mangrove habitats. According to recent projections,¹⁸ global mean sea-level could rise by an estimated 0.61-1.1 metres by the year 2100, which would place most Indian coastal cities at high risk of complete submergence or, at the very least, of experiencing frequent inundation during high tide conditions. Changes in sea-level impact the structure, growth, and areal extent of the mangroves, while increase in temperature affects their density.¹⁹ In an assessment conducted by Gilman et al. in 2015,²⁰ it has been suggested that sea-level rise will be the primary driver of future mangrove area losses in the Sunderbans. The Sunderbans area, straddling India and Bangladesh, has the world’s largest mangrove ecosystem, which is recognised as the largest land-based carbon sink in South Asia. The Sunderbans mangrove forest was declared a ‘reserve forest’ in 1996, and a ‘UNESCO World Heritage Site’, in 1997,²¹ because of its crucial environmental and socio-economic role. As per the latest India State of Forest survey report, Sunderbans lost 2 sq km of mangrove cover, going from 2214 sq km to 2112.11 sq km, between 2017 and 2019. This loss was primarily driven by erosion and sea-level rise in the Bay of Bengal.²²

Besides sea-level rise, storms and tropical cyclones also have significant impacts on the coast, directly through damage caused by extreme winds, and indirectly through storm surges and high tides.²³ For instance, following the *tsunami* that occurred in the Indian Ocean in 2004, it was reported that around 62-70 per cent of the mangrove forest in the Nicobar Islands was damaged and uprooted,²⁴ and Pichavaram mangroves suffered 5–10 per cent damage.²⁵ In the case of the

¹⁷ Rajarshi Gupta Das and Rajib Shaw, “Cumulative Impacts of Human Interventions and Climate Change on Mangrove Ecosystems of South and Southeast Asia: An Overview”, *Journal of Ecosystems*, 2013.

¹⁸ IPCC, *Sea Level Rise and Implications for Low-Lying Islands, Coasts and Communities*, Special Report on the Ocean and Cryosphere in a Changing Climate, 2019, <https://www.ipcc.ch/srocc/chapter/chapter-4-sea-level-rise-and-implications-for-low-lying-islands-coasts-and-communities/>

Scott A Kulp and Benjamin Strauss, “New Elevation Data Triple Estimates of Global Vulnerability to Sea-Level Rise and Coastal Flooding. *Nature Communications*, 10, No. 4844 (2019). <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41467-019-12808-z#citeas>

¹⁹ Prashant Srivastava, Abhinav Mehta, Sudhir Singh and Tanvir Islam, “Assessing Impact of Climate Change on Mundra Mangrove Forest Ecosystem, Gulf of Kutch, Western Coast of India: A Synergistic Evaluation Using Remote Sensing”, *Theoretical and Applied Climatology*, 120, (2015): 685-700.

²⁰ Eric Gilman, J. Duke Ellison and Colin Field, “Threats to Mangroves from Climate Change and Adaptation Options: A review”, *Aquatic Botany*, 89, No 2 (2008): 237-250.

²¹ Payo Mukhopadhyay, S Hazra, et al, “Projected Changes in Area of the Sunderbans Mangrove Forest in Bangladesh Due to SLR by 2100”, *Climatic Change* 139, (2016): 279–291 <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10584-016-1769-z>

²² Rajarshi Gupta Das and Rajib Shaw, “Cumulative Impacts of Human Interventions and Climate Change on Mangrove Ecosystems of South and Southeast Asia: An Overview”, *Journal of Ecosystems*, 2013.

²³ Robert Nicholls, “Benefits of Mitigation of Climate Change of Coastal Areas”, *Global Environment Change*, 14 No 3 (2004): 229-244.

²⁴ Prabakaran Nehru and Paramasivam Balasubramania, “Re-colonising Mangrove Species in Tsunami Devastated Habitats at the Nicobar Islands, India”, *Journal of Species list and Distribution*, 7 No 3 (2011): 253: 256.

²⁵ Rajarshi Das Gupta and Rajib Shaw, “Cumulative Impacts of Human Interventions and Climate Change on Mangrove Ecosystems of South and Southeast Asia: An Overview”, *Journal of Ecosystems*, 2013.

1999 Orissa Super Cyclone (IMD designation BOB 06 — cyclones began to be named only from the following year), the Forest Survey of India assessed that at least 50 per cent and 40 per cent of the mangroves had been lost in two districts of Orissa, namely, Jagatsinghpur and Kendrapara, respectively, which hold a significant share of the Mahanadi mangroves.²⁶ Similarly, Cyclone *Amphan*, in 2020, damaged vast swaths (an area of some 1, 600 sq km) of the mangrove forest in the Indian Sunderbans that accounts nearly 40 per cent of the total area of 4,000 sq km.²⁷

Although, as has been mentioned earlier, mangroves are well adapted, both morphologically and physiologically, to saline conditions, this is true only up to a finite threshold. A great degree of variation in water and soil salinity has been recorded in Indian coastal states in recent decades, with some regions experiencing significant increases. For instance, salinity in the Pichavaram mangrove of Tamil Nadu, varied between 0.6 per cent and 36.2 per cent during 2004-2005.²⁸ Dr V Selvam, the lead researcher who is looking into the depletion of mangrove cover in Tamil Nadu, noted in an interview in 2019 that the wetlands in Pichvaram and Muthupet have lost five species of mangrove trees over just 70 years, due to the sharp increase in salinity levels.²⁹ High salinity has severe and entirely adverse impacts on the species-diversity of mangroves and on even marine animal species. A notable decrease of gastropods (snails, slugs, etc.) in the Pichavaram mangroves was reported and, similarly, migratory water birds' populations were also shown to decline, due to increases in salinity.³⁰ Extreme saline conditions have also led to a 90 per cent reduction in freshwater flow.³¹ When the supply of fresh water decreases, afforestation of mangrove in highly saline coastal wetlands becomes challenging.

Anthropogenic Factors that Impact Mangroves

Another major cause for impairment of mangrove forests in India is due to anthropogenic activities such as conversion of mangrove habitats into agricultural land or for the promotion of aquaculture, tourism, and urban development in general.³² A majority of India's coastal communities are dependent on agriculture for their livelihood. It has been recorded that over the past 100 years, about 1,50,000 hectares³³ of mangroves have been destroyed in India and

²⁶ Gupta and Shaw, "Cumulative Impacts of Human Interventions and Climate Change on Mangrove Ecosystems of South and Southeast Asia: An Overview", 2013.

²⁷ The Bengal Story, "Amphan Effect: 5 Crore Mangrove to be Planted in the Sunderbans", 3 June 2020, <https://thebengalstory.com/english/amphan-effect-5-crore-mangroves-to-be-planted-in-the-sunderbans/>

²⁸ Ravichandran Samuthirapandian, S Anthronisamy, T. Kannupandi and Balasubramanian Thanavel, "Habitat Preference of Crabs in Pichavaram Mangrove Environment, Southeast Coast of India", *Journal of Fish and Aquatic Science*, 2 (47-55): 2007.

²⁹ Ankita Sengupta, "TN Loses 5 Mangrove Species as Soil Salinity increases in Coastal Areas", *DTNEXT*, June 06 2019, <https://www.dtnext.in/News/TopNews/2019/06/06060527/1141087/TN-loses-5-mangrove-species-as-soil-salinity-increases.vpf>

³⁰ Sadilyan Sambandam, K Thiayagesan and Rajarathinavelu Nagarajan, et al. "Salinity Rise in Indian Mangrove- A Looming Danger for Coastal Biodiversity", *Current Science*, 98, No 6 (754-756): 2010.

³¹ Rajarshi Dasgupta, and Rajib Shaw, "Cumulative Impacts of Human Interventions and Climate Change on Mangrove Ecosystems of South and Southeast Asia: An Overview", *Journal of Ecosystems*, 2013

³² Sudam C Sahu, HS Suresh, IK Murthy, and NH Ravindranath, "Mangrove Area Assessment in India: Implications of Loss of Mangrove", *Journal of Earth Science and Climate Change*, 6, No 5 (2015): 1-7.

³³ One hectare [abbreviation: 'ha'] is equal to 2.47 acres or 10,000 square metres

Bangladesh in order to make land available for agricultural purposes.³⁴ Further, Indian coastal cities are experiencing rapid urbanisation and the concomitant development of urban infrastructure, whereby the majority of mangrove forest in Indian coastlines have been lost to land-reclamation and other supposedly ‘developmental’ projects. Mumbai city is a perfect example, as it was built on a cluster of seven islands each of which was surrounded by mangroves. In the case of the Mumbai suburban region, a total mangrove area of 36.54 sq km was lost during a period of just 11 years, from 1990 to 2001, which accounted for a 39.32 per cent decrease in the mangrove cover area.³⁵ Even more recently, hundreds of acres of mangroves have been cleared for the construction of the Navi Mumbai International airport. This can be seen in the satellite images shown in **Figure 2**.



Fig 2: Google Earth image of the vicinity of Navi Mumbai International Airport. Left panel corresponds to 12 November 2003, right panel corresponds to 12 November 2019.

Source: Sushmita Pathak, “Mangroves Help Fight the Effects of Climate Change. So Why is Mumbai Destroying them?”, NPR, 25 November 2019, <https://www.npr.org/sections/goatsandsoda/2019/11/25/781990792/mangroves-help-fight-the-effects-of-climate-change-so-why-is-mumbai-destroying-them>

The image on the left was taken on 12 November 2003, where the green areas correspond to the forest cover that was then available. The image on the right corresponds to 12 November 2019, which clearly shows that hundreds of acres of mangroves were destroyed over these 16 years.³⁶ Tragically, urban-development projects continue to endanger mangrove forests. Last year (2019), Maharashtra’s Transport Minister blandly stated that around 32,044 mangroves would be cleared for the Mumbai-Ahmedabad bullet train project.³⁷ Achal Khare, Managing Director of the National High-Speed Rail Corporation Limited (NHSRCL), claimed that “*if 32,044 mangroves are cut, then around 1,60,000 new mangroves will be planted, and the entire financial expense will be borne by NHSRCL*”.³⁸ However, even as the Maharashtra government promises to replant mangroves to substitute those that were cleared, there is no land available within the city to replant the

³⁴ Sahu, Suresh et al., “Mangrove Area Assessment in India: Implications of Loss of Mangroves”, 1-7.

³⁵ V Vijay, RS Biradar, AB Inamdar, G. Deshmukhe, et al. “Mangrove Mapping and Change Detection around Mumbai Using Remotely Sensed Data”, Indian Journal of Marine Sciences, 34, No 3 (2005): 310-315.

³⁶ Sushmita Pathak, “Mangroves Help Fight the Effect of Climate Change. So Why is Mumbai Destroying Them?”, NPR, 25 Nov 2019, <https://www.npr.org/sections/goatsandsoda/2019/11/25/781990792/mangroves-help-fight-the-effects-of-climate-change-so-why-is-mumbai-destroying-t>

³⁷ Badri Chatterjee, “32K Mangrove to be Razed for Bullet Train, NHSRCL Confirms”, *Hindustan Times*, 30 Jun 2019, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/cities/32k-mangroves-to-be-razed-for-bullet-train-nhsrcl-confirms/story-FLUWtnYITKrcghylzIXyuL.html>

³⁸ Badri Chatterjee, “32K Mangrove to be Razed for Bullet Train, NHSRCL Confirms”, *Hindustan Times*, 30 Jun 2019, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/cities/32k-mangroves-to-be-razed-for-bullet-train-nhsrcl-confirms/story-FLUWtnYITKrcghylzIXyuL.html>

mangroves, as was pointed out by Debi Goenka, the executive trustee of a Mumbai-based non-profit organisation, the 'Conservation Action Trust'. Goenka pointed out that even if mangrove restoration did, by some miracle, take place, most of the planted saplings would not survive. Presently, Mumbai city has only 2 sq km of mangrove forests in all. This is a huge loss for this megapolis, if only because mangroves are highly efficient natural defences against sea-level-rise and cyclonic storms, both of which have already begun to ravage the city.

The seemingly ceaseless development of ports and harbours is also contributing to mangrove degradation. For instance, the port of Mundra, in Gujarat, has been roundly condemned globally for severely degrading Indus delta mangroves. Likewise, Paradip Port in Odisha has also been reported to have built over dense patches of Mahanadi delta mangroves.³⁹

Pollution is yet another big challenge for the mangrove ecosystem, especially in megacities such as Mumbai and Kolkata. Large amounts of solid waste and effluents from various sources are being callously dumped into the mangrove ecosystems. Oil spills, when they happen in coastal waters, severely impact mangrove ecosystems. If all this were not enough, the construction of dams on rivers also leads to reduced flow of freshwater, which adversely affects the growth of mangroves.

Implications of Loss of Mangroves

The acceleration of unsustainable human activities, coupled with the adverse impacts of climate change, are threatening the mangrove ecosystem, placing the lives and livelihoods of millions of coastal residents at high levels of risk. Any further loss of mangrove forests would leave coastal communities without a vital line of defence against extreme-weather events that are becoming more frequent and more intense. Numerous studies have shown that mangroves play a critical role in protecting coastal communities from the impact of large storms. For instance, when Cyclone *Bulbul* hit Odisha and West Bengal on 9 Nov 2019, it was reported that the wind speed of Cyclone *Bulbul* was reduced by 20 km an hour because of the Sunderbans mangrove forest. This saved the rest of southern West Bengal from the disastrous storm, which might otherwise have proven to be cataclysmic for Kolkata and its environs.⁴⁰ On the other hand, the catastrophic impact of the unprecedented flooding in Mumbai, in 2005, was exacerbated by the lack of mangroves along the 18 km long *Mithi* river. These mangroves had earlier been cleared for construction purposes. Consequently, Mumbai was left without any natural buffer against flood surges.

More often than not, biodiversity and the functioning of marine ecosystems are closely interlinked. A loss of biodiversity could limit the functioning of ecosystems, which subsequently reduces their capacity to provide goods and services to coastal communities. Roughly 560 million people live along India's coastline and the vast majority of them are

³⁹ PK Nanda, "The Port of Paradip: Mangrove Forest to a Major Port," *Orissa Review*, Government of Orissa, (2011): 68–78.

⁴⁰ Shweta Sengar, "Mangroves Saved Hundreds of Lives in Odisha and West Bengal During Cyclone Bulbul, and this is Why we Must Save them", *India Times*, 14 Nov, 2019, <https://www.indiatimes.com/news/india/mangroves-saved-hundreds-of-lives-in-odisha-west-bengal-during-cyclone-bulbul-this-is-why-we-must-save-them-500414.html>

dependent on marine and coastal ecosystems, even if they and their elected representatives seem largely oblivious of this fact.

Mangroves serve as a critical breeding ground and nursery habitat for a wide range of marine organisms, including shrimps and fishes. Importantly, commercial marine fish species such as cuttlefish, squid, lobster, shrimp, and certain types of finfish, contribute enormously to India's seafood exports.⁴¹ India ranks second, globally, in fish-production; the fisheries sector employs 145 million people and contributes 1.07 per cent to the GDP, as per a recent estimate of the National Fisheries Development Board.⁴² If conserved, mangroves have the potential to significantly enhance the productivity of fisheries. On the other hand, a continuing loss of mangrove forests, will significantly and adversely impact the health and quantity of fisheries and hence the economic productivity of coastal communities.

The role of mangrove forest ecosystems, particularly in the tropics, in mitigating climate change through carbon sequestration can hardly be overstated, given that these ecosystems constitute one of the largest carbon sinks.⁴³ Conversely, when these mangroves are cut down, they release significant quantities of stored carbon, accelerating global warming. India is currently the eighth-largest carbon emitter in the world in terms of total amount of annual CO₂ emissions and is likely to become the second-largest carbon emitter by 2050. Therefore, mangroves are more critical now than ever to counteract the rise in carbon emissions from human activities and mitigate global climate change.

Way Forward: Conservation of Mangroves

There has been some success in restoration of mangrove forests in India, but it is nowhere near enough, given the rate of loss of mangroves during the last few decades. A far more inclusive framework for understanding, predicting, and managing interactions between climate change, human activities, and coastal ecosystems needs to be formulated. At the most basic level, efforts must be made to create awareness and educate the public regarding the vital role that mangroves play and provide community training to generate the requisite skills and knowledge to conserve and restore mangrove ecosystems.

In recent years, some policies and conservation efforts from government, NGOs, and local communities in India, have played an important role in sustaining and restoring mangrove forests. For instance, a community-based restoration programme was carried out by local communities in the Krishna district of Andhra Pradesh, where the community innovated new techniques for cultivation and plantation of mangroves, created a village-level Forest

⁴¹ A, Untawale, "Asia Country Reports: India, In: Mangroves of Asia and the Pacific: Status and Management, pp. 51–87. In: Technical Report of the UNDP: UNESCO Research and Training Pilot Programme on Mangrove Ecosystems in Asia and the Pacific, 1986.

⁴² Kushankur Dey, "India's Blue Economy Net getting Bigger! Country Ranks Third in Fisheries and Second in Aquaculture", *Financial Express*, 14 February 2020, <https://www.financialexpress.com/opinion/indias-blue-economy-net-getting-bigger-country-ranks-third-in-fisheries-and-second-in-aquaculture/1867607/>

⁴³ Sudam Sahu, Manish Kumar and Ravindranath, "Carbon Stocks in Natural and Planted Mangrove Forests of Mahanadi Mangrove Wetland, East Coast of India", *Current Science*, 110, no 12 (2016): 2234-2241.

Conservation Council, and planted 6000 mangrove saplings in the district.⁴⁴ In Gujarat, the mangrove conservation strategy involves large-scale plantation, development of new mangrove habitats at suitable areas, and, capacity-building of managers and staff. Different approaches, strategies, and methods must be studied and promoted and the success stories shared.

Conservation of mangroves can be enhanced by devising well-balanced coastal land-use plans, such as maintaining sustainable limits in logging and other harvesting activities. Mangroves also hold religious, cultural, and sentimental value to the local communities, which is another reason to protect and preserve them. The inland mangrove forests in Shravan Kavadia, Kachchh, are considered sacred and the locals in that area strictly regulate any exploitation of the forests as such activities are believed to be inauspicious. Similarly, the Kagekanu forest patch, which is dominated by species such as *Rhizophora mucronata*, *Avicennia officinalis* and *Kandelia candel*, off the coast of Karwar in Karnataka, is one of the examples of traditional conservation through sacred groves.⁴⁵ In a way, the resource-dependent community of Karwar protects its forest from destruction as they associate nature with sacred deities. Therefore, traditional conservation strategies and inclusion of local and resource-dependent communities should be given priority in policy making.

Participation of the local community in the conservation and prevention of illegal clearing and encroachment of mangrove areas is crucial. There are a few cases where resource-dependent communities have fought against illegal activities. For instance, Sahjeevan, an NGO based in Kachchh initiated a photo story campaign to raise funds for the Camel Breeders Association of Kutch (*Kuth Ucherak Maldhari Sangathan* (KUUMS)) to “Save the Mangroves of Kandla from Salt Making Industries”. It was stated that in February 2018, “Hitachi machines and tractors illegally cleared more than 4 sq km of pristine mangrove forest for salt industries”.⁴⁶ Camel breeders and camels are dependent on the mangroves for their livelihood. The Camel Breeder association members saw the threat and protested against the destruction; and have started the process to revive the mangroves that were destroyed for ostensibly ‘developmental’ purposes. In such a situation, local authorities and other concerned stakeholders need to support the community and provide it with necessary resources, be these monetary or legal assistance. Therefore, existing forest rules must be strictly enforced to prevent unlawful entry/encroachment and indiscriminate exploitation.

In the face of rapid urbanisation of coastal cities, urban development policies should vigorously address the issue of livelihoods of slum dwellers and urban poverty in India. As Seema Adgaonkar, who until recently was one of the four Range Forest Officers at the Mumbai Mangrove Conservation Unit, and has been guarding the city’s vital coastal ecosystem has said, *“It’s very difficult to demolish illegal structures and slums encroaching mangrove areas. There are social and*

⁴⁴ UNDP, “Taking Care of the Mangroves”, *UNDP India*, 26 July 2018, <https://www.in.undp.org/content/india/en/home/climate-and-disaster-resilience/successstories/taking-care-of-the-mangroves-.html>

⁴⁵ Sahu SC, Suresh HS, Murthy IK, Ravindranath NH, “Mangrove Area Assessment in India: Implications of Loss of Mangroves”, *Journal of Earth Science and Climate Change*, 6, No 5 (2015): 1-7.

⁴⁶ Shjeevan, <http://www.sahjeevan.org/index.html>

political pressures from all sides on us.”⁴⁷ Ensuring urban poor with shelter and access to basic urban infrastructure and services would address some of the problems of urban poor in the encroachment of the mangrove ecosystem.

While conservation of mangroves in the context of anthropogenic activities and pollution is discussed at least occasionally, even if not frequently enough, there is very little discussion on protection of mangroves from climate change. As has already been explained, the health, growth, survival, and productivity of mangroves are largely influenced by the rise in salinity in soil. Extreme climate change is a looming danger for the entire mangrove ecosystem. Since degradation of mangrove ecosystem is caused by a wide range of factors, which cannot be treated in isolation, it is necessary to adopt an integrated management approach by taking into consideration all the factors such as sea-level rise, extreme weather, and human exploitation, and involve all the stakeholders to protect and conserve mangroves.

Acknowledgement

I am grateful to Vice Admiral Pradeep Chauhan (DG NMF), Dr Pushp Bajaj, and Mrs Sunanda Khanna, for their valuable inputs.

About the Author

Chime Youdon is an Associate Fellow and a ‘Vice Admiral KK Nayyar’ Fellow at the National Maritime Foundation. She is deeply engaged in a set of major studies relating to resilience-assessments of urban agglomerates in the face of climate change and is concentrating upon the city of Mumbai. She may be contacted at climatechange1.nmf@gmail.com

⁴⁷ Kartik Chandramouli, “Mongabay Series: Environment and Her”, *Mongabay*, 25 July 2019, <https://india.mongabay.com/2019/07/she-guards-mumbais-defence-against-climate-change/>