

The Fate of 19 Lakh People Hangs in the Balance

# eclectic

## NORTHEAST

We Speak For Our Region

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The festival has continued to grow in popularity  
over the years



**“Mahbubul Hoque: Game Changer  
in Higher Education Scenario  
of the North East”**



environment

# Saving the Environment by Rethinking Development

**As the Northeast faces a growing environmental crisis, we need to move beyond treating conservation and development as needs in opposition towards integrated models, such as Rural Futures**

Ranjit Barthakur



Between 2001 and 2018, the Northeast lost 12,523 square kilometres of forest cover, according to Global Forest Watch. According to these estimates and numbers, this means nearly 75% of all deforestation that happened in India during that period, happened in the Northeast. In spite of this, the Northeast still holds a quarter of India's forest cover and carbon stock and retains nearly 60% of its green cover. While forests fragment and land degradation is accelerating, the changes are not yet irreversible and immediate, decisive action will save the region's fragile habitats.

Traditionally, conservation efforts have focused on segregating man and wild; pitting human needs and

aspirations directly against forests and habitats. The cost of this segregation has been a further fragmenting and shrinking of habitat spaces, continued declines in biodiversity and human rights abuses among some of the most vulnerable forest-fringe communities. Meanwhile the biggest drivers of biodiversity decline and environmental loss remain uncontrolled for. According to a study published in *Nature*, over 30% of the world's biodiversity is directly threatened by global commodity supply chains.

## **The Naturenomics™ Future: An Ecological Economy**

The assumption at the heart of this divide between

people and habitats is the question of economic growth. Growth, today, relies on the destruction of natural wealth and heavily externalized costs, with serious detriment to the environment. Disappearing habitats and environmental destruction is the price we pay for development. And yet for centuries, indigenous and local communities around the world have structured economies and societies around their local ecologies, living in synergy with the very wildernesses they are now assumed to be the enemies of.

Saving vital habitats means rethinking some of our most basic assumptions about development—what we aspire to, what we think it should look like and how we plan on getting there. Sustainable development efforts have largely focused on a business as usual model, with natural resource preservation added on as an afterthought. However, as modelling and projections by the IPCC and other think-tanks such as the Institute for New Economic Thinking show, business as usual will overheat and destroy our world as we know it. The future calls for urgent action—to put ecology back in economy by securing our natural assets, strengthening our natural capital base and with a Naturenomics™ perspective, mainstreaming the interdependency of economy and ecology.

### **Beyond Sustainable Development and Conservation: Rural Futures**

Achieving this calls for moving beyond development models that focus on heavy industrialization and capital intensive large-scale projects, towards a model of development focused on creating ecologically-centred income growth among rural and local communities. These communities are the primary stakeholders in our region's natural assets, on the frontlines in the fight for the future of our environment. By empowering them, we equip them to protect our forests—and our future.

The Rural Futures vision for development focuses on promoting income security for communities through habitat restoration and key agro-forestry activity, with a long-term view of creating sustainable and alternate nature capital centred business such as mindful natural tourism. Communities achieve socioeconomic mobility by earning returns on the labour put in to restoring habitats and forests. In places with little to no development and few economic opportunities, the implications of this model for community livelihoods in the present are tremendous.

This in turns paves the way for future income security: the estimated natural capital value of a

mature forest is ₹303,000 per hectare. A forest of just 1200 hectares, therefore, could provide over ₹360 million in income per annum for communities. Leveraged correctly, this value can be sustainably liquidated on local markets, creating localized value chains through community forestry and an economy where habitat regeneration and income security are pegged to each other. In time, this value generated could even form the economic base for delivering infrastructure and access for basic human needs such as education, healthcare, energy access and water and food security.

### **Investing in an Ecological Civilization**

The future of sustainable development depends, as well, on how we invest. Business and investment models must deepen their investments in natural capital by building up natural capital banks and enhancing natural capital values through markets. Governments must look into developing natural capital across the Eastern Himalayas as sovereign wealth funds, benefitting communities as they labour to regenerate these rich natural assets. The forests of the Eastern Himalayas are rich with natural wealth, which if effectively and sustainably tapped, could provide communities with a pool of universal basic income.

Their future, however, depends heavily on action taken within the next decade. Building ecological civilizations starts at the grassroots level—through programmatic approaches such as Rural Futures that focus on natural asset creation and habitat restoration as a means of building resiliency and adaptive capacity among local communities in the region. The fifth industrial revolution must be ecologically centred as humanity faces its greatest existential threat yet—or else we face the risk of complete extinction. With Rural Futures, we build a glocalised solution for the future; a cross-border, cross-community vision for action, bridging social and cultural differences for ecological civilization. 🌱

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**Photo: Balipara Reserve Forest and ULM team**