



India Inc. Leads Land Restoration For People, Planet And Profits

As the world focuses on land restoration, corporates are stepping up to address environmental challenges, balancing economic growth with ecological sustainability. A World Environment Day special

By **Naina Gautam**



This year's World Environment Day, hosted by Saudi Arabia, centres on land restoration, desertification and drought resilience.

Marking the 30th anniversary of the UN Convention to Combat Desertification, the focus highlights a pressing global issue: nearly 40% of the planet's land is degraded, affecting half the world's population and risking approximately half of global GDP (\$44 trillion).

The triple planetary crisis of climate change, pollution and biodiversity loss affects businesses dependent on land resources as they face disrupted supply chains if degradation is not reversed. At the same time, land ecosystems are critical for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals

(SDGs), particularly SDG 15.3, which seeks to "achieve a land degradation-neutral world" by 2030. This is where the role of corporates becomes crucial beyond their stated intent to be socially responsible in restoring nature.

Just as land restoration has stayed as a crucial issue to the UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration (2021–2030), the G20 Summit recently held in India saw global leaders outlining key initiatives to combat land degradation.

The G20 New Delhi Leaders' Declaration states, "We commit to restoring by 2030 at least 30% of all degraded ecosystems and scaling up efforts to achieve land degradation neutrality," and supports the ambition to reduce land degradation by 50% by 2040.

India, a climate leader, signed

the UN Convention to Combat Desertification in 1994 and aims to restore 26 million hectares of degraded land by 2030, hopefully with active participation from corporates. Initiatives like the National Afforestation Programme, launched in 2000, have increased forest cover in the country to 21.23%, an addition of 5,871 square kilometres, and protected areas now cover about 4.8% of the country's total land area.

India's efforts also include publishing a Desertification and Land Degradation Atlas, launching an online portal with the Space Application Centre (SAC) of the Indian Space Research Organisation to document degraded lands, and establishing a Centre of Excellence at the Indian Council for Forestry Research and Education



(ICFRE) in Dehradun to foster knowledge sharing on sustainable land management.

The Business Case

As the discourse around environment becomes holistic and moves beyond climate change, the global and Indian business community have developed the dual strategy of mixing business with social intent, in which restoring land ecosystems becomes a crucial part.

A report by IDH, an international network that supports sustainable trade, “forward-looking banks, companies, and other investors have increasingly committed to making capital available that considers not only financial returns but also socially equitable and environmental returns”.

The World Economic Forum’s 2020 report *Nature Risk Rising: Why the Crisis Engulfing Nature Matters for Business and the Economy* warns that biodiversity loss and ecosystem collapse are among the top five global threats. With \$44 trillion of economic value generation—over half of the world’s total GDP—dependent on nature, businesses must place nature at the centre of their operations. This involves assessing, mitigating and disclosing nature-related risks to avoid disruptions.

Global experts suggest that investments in nature-based solutions should increase from \$200 billion to \$542 billion by 2030 to meet global climate, biodiversity and ecosystem restoration goals. However, finance remains a significant obstacle in achieving this target. Experts expect governments, businesses and finance leaders to collaborate to bridge this financial gap.

Businesses can embed ecosystem



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restoration into their operations, adopt sustainable technologies and ensure equal access to resources, training and funding for women and youth-led enterprises in ecotourism, organic farming, and sustainable forestry. Indian corporates have made a movement in some of these areas. K.T. Jithendran, managing director and CEO at Birla Estates, says, “We promote extensive implementation of eco-friendly building strategies from a project’s inception to its completion. We conduct biodiversity studies at our projects and implement initiatives to protect and enhance biodiversity, such as tree plantation, native tree plantations, creating water bodies and theme-based plantations.”

Navin Jaju, CEO of Vedanta Sesa Goa, says that land restoration efforts made by his group have transformed Sanquelim in north Goa into a vibrant ecotourism destination. “The Sanquelim Mine Reclamation programme has helped restore and enhance biodiversity, attracting a rich array of flora and fauna by selectively cutting mature acacia plants and planting native species

from the Western Ghats,” he says.

He adds that the Sanquelim mine project has set a benchmark for sustainable post-mining land use, creating a positive environmental and social impact. “In collaboration with the National Institute of Oceanography, an exhausted mine pit at Sanquelim has been transformed into a thriving pisciculture pond, promoting the cultivation of rohu and mrigal carp. This supports local consumption and demonstrates the multifaceted value of rehabilitated mining areas,” he adds.

Navdeep Singh Mehram, VP- CSR and Sustainability, Diageo India says, “As part of Diageo India’s, Society 2030: Spirit of Progress ESG action plan we support landscape restoration through Nature based Solutions (NbS) to protect, effectively manage and restore natural resources. Few examples are building resilient water replenishment ecosystems, promoting regenerative agricultural practices and enhancing green cover through plantation and biodiversity.”

Arun Misra, CEO, Hindustan Zinc, says, “We are committed to being responsible stewards of the environment. Land restoration is a core pillar of this mission. We actively work to create biodiverse ecosystems that thrive. Be it our sewage treatment plant or miyawaki plantation land or solar plants on wasteland. We believe that sustainable mining can co-exist with a healthy environment.”

Shivdutt Das, Executive Director of Vishwa Samudra Group, says, “We are committed to pioneering sustainable road construction practices that prioritise environmental conservation and land restoration. With the advent



of innovative technologies like StabilRoad, we are witnessing a paradigm shift in the industry.”

He adds, “The adoption of these German technologies is a game-changer in the industry enabling us to construct roads by utilising the existing soil surface and minimising the need for stone aggregate extraction up to 85%. This technology employs a 100% natural mineral based additive that activates and strengthens the existing soil, eliminating the necessity for mountain blasting or mining operations. By reducing our reliance on quarrying activities, we significantly mitigate the environmental impact on natural landscapes. We also contribute to land restoration efforts by minimising resource extraction.”

Saving the Interconnected Future

UN Environment Programme’s article *Decade on Ecosystem Restoration* defines ecosystem restoration as assisting in the recovery of degraded ecosystems and conserving intact ecosystems. Restoration can involve planting or removing pressures to allow nature to recover independently.

For economies to thrive, addressing land degradation is essential. The UNEP’s 2021 report *Becoming #GenerationRestoration: Ecosystem Restoration for People, Nature and Climate* states that recent economic development has often come at the expense of biodiversity and ecosystem services, which is unsustainable, particularly for low-income countries reliant on ecosystems for their livelihoods and well-being.

Similarly, the World Economic Forum’s report *Nature Risk Rising:*



Why the Crisis Engulfing Nature Matters for Business and the Economy (2020) stated that biodiversity loss and ecosystem collapse is one of the top five threats that humankind will face in the next 10 years.

Investments in restoration can yield significant benefits for the planet, people and profits. The UNEP report underscores that economies and societies are in unison with nature. Besides leading to the production of many goods and services consumed in our economies, ecosystems supply a wide range of essential services. The UNEP estimates that restoring 350 million hectares of degraded terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems by 2030 could generate \$9 trillion in ecosystem services, with economic benefits far outweighing the costs.

With such high social and economic stakes riding on land restoration and creation of ecosystem services, one should expect these concerns to increasingly feature in the environmental, social and

governance (ESG) reports of major Indian corporates. The growing adoption of ESG principles by businesses globally, along with their vigorous implementation in India, suggests a potential for exponential growth in land restoration efforts.

Anu Chaudhary, Partner, Global Head of ESG Consulting says, “By embedding land restoration into their ESG strategy, Indian corporates can play a pivotal role in addressing land degradation while enhancing their sustainability performance and resilience. The Taskforce on Nature-related Financial Disclosures (TNFD) provides a framework for corporates to assess, disclose, and manage nature related risks and opportunities.”

She adds, “Aligning land restoration efforts with TNFD recommendations can enable Indian corporates manage risks, enhance sustainability, and support community development leading to a more resilient and sustainable future.” 