

THE IMPORTANCE OF FORESTS

Forests and trees have always been of great importance to mankind since prehistoric times. They perform vital functions that have been broadly classified into environmental, economic and socio-cultural values. They are important, valuable and necessary to our very existence. It is not too hard to believe that, without them we, humans, would not exist on this beautiful planet. They are essential to life and are the ground troops in an environmental frontline. Our existing forests and the trees we plant work in tandem to make a better world. People love to enjoy and appreciate fresh air, clear water, beautiful scenery and wildlife.



BACKGROUND ON FORESTS

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Mauritius is a small island developing state (SIDS) and, as such, faces various physical constraints that are similar to other small islands. The forests of Mauritius are small in area but perform vital functions, the most important of them being soil and water conservation. Where water is scarce, all major activities like agriculture, tourism or manufacturing are seriously affected.



Catchment areas around Mare aux Vacoas reservoir



Native vegetation

The environmental functions of forests in small islands like Mauritius far outweigh their direct economic functions. The remaining native forests still harbour a rich variety of fauna and flora with a high level of endemism. In addition, it is generally recognized that these forests have great ecological, social and cultural importance. The forest resources of Mauritius do contribute in environmental rehabilitation, creation of job opportunities, supply of wood and non-wood products, food security, ecotourism, recreation and national well-being. Forests also play an important role in carbon sequestration and the conservation of biodiversity. Mauritius is rich in endemic species. Consequently, conservation, protection, development of such species through sustainable management of forests and the environment are priority objectives of the overall National Forest Policy of Mauritius. In fact, the forests of the island are now managed more for these functions rather than for timber production.

ENVIRONMENTAL FUNCTIONS

- ***Soil and water conservation***

Forest and trees reduce the rate of surface run-off of water. They prevent and check flash-floods and soil erosion, and produce prolonged gradual run-off and hence provide a safeguard against drought.

- ***Carbon dioxide (CO₂) sequestration and mitigation of global warming***

Forests, forest soils and trees sequester tremendous amount of CO₂ and hence help in the mitigation of global warming.

- ***Habitat for wildlife & conservation of biodiversity***

Forests are habitats for a variety of wildlife including rare plants, birds and insects. Our native forests are storehouses of biological diversity. They harbour the rich native and endemic fauna and flora, which represent the remarkable genetic resources of the country.



Trochetia boutoniana - Our National Flower



Mangrove forest

- ***Clean Water***

The forests act as a sponge, absorbing rain-water through channels created by the tree roots and slowly filtering and releasing it in streams, rivers and reservoirs.

- ***Pure Air***

Forests and trees release large amount of oxygen to maintain the air balance. Moreover, they cleanse the air by intercepting airborne particles and pollutants such as carbon monoxide, sulphur dioxide and nitrogen dioxide.

- ***Protecting reservoirs, rivers and coastal lagoons against sedimentation***

By checking soil erosion, forests protect reservoirs, rivers and coastal lagoons against sedimentation.

- ***Protection against cyclone and salt spray***

Coastal forests and trees stabilize sand dunes and act as a buffer against cyclonic winds and salt spray. Moreover, mangroves provide a rich habitat for crabs, fish and shrimps.

ECONOMIC FUNCTIONS



Wood exploitation



Cervus timorensis russa (Deer)

- **Employment and revenues**

The forestry sector generates significant revenues and employment, such as *guava*, *tamarin*, *jamblon* and fodder collectors, woodcutters, handicraft artisans, game keepers, etc. It provides livelihood to the low-income group and hence contributes in poverty alleviation.

- **Timber, poles & fuelwood**

Although wood exploitation has significantly decreased on State lands over the last ten years, forests and trees provide valuable timber, poles and fuelwood, which are renewable commodities, when properly managed.

- **Non-wood forest products (NWFP)**

Non-wood forest products play a significant role in food security. Deer, wild pigs, monkeys, honey, vegetal fibres, fodder, amongst others, are much sought after.

- **Medicinal plant**

Forests harbour many medicinal plants which are used as traditional medicine. Many plants and herbs are potential sources for new drugs that could cure modern-day ailments.

- **Ecotourism**

Ecotourism is on the rise and is a promising sub-sector of the tourism industry. It offers more scope for employment and revenue generation than timber production, which is significantly decreasing.

- **Fruits**

Seasonal fruits like *tamarind*, *goyave de chine* and *jamblon* provide part-time employment for the low-income group; they are also a rich source of vitamin C.

SOCIO-CULTURAL FUNCTIONS

- **Leisure and recreation**

Forests offer unique leisure and recreational opportunities for both the local population and tourists.



Nature Trail at Bras d'Eau



Grand Bassin Lake

- **Meditation and Spiritual sites**

Our forests offer great scope for meditation and spiritualism. For example, Grand Bassin is a sacred lake surrounded by beautiful forests. It attracts pilgrims worldwide during the Maha Shivaratree festival. It is also a great tourist attraction. Another famous and spectacular site is Le Morne Brabant, which has been declared a World Heritage Site by UNESCO.

- **Use of forest products in religious ceremonies**

Some forest products such as camphor, cypress and sandal wood are used in religious ceremonies.

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Forest & Water Cycle

