



## THE REVIEW

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### Big Trees

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## A tale of two forests



Once upon a time, there were dense forests on both sides of the Indus River in Sindh. These riverine forests relied on inundation by the Indus River for irrigation and in turn they protected its banks from flooding. The forests were also home to a variety of animals like hog deer, wild boars and jungle cats.

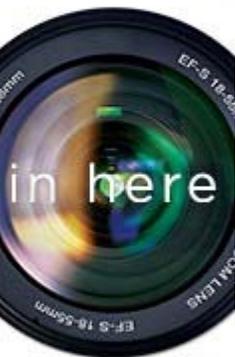
The people who lived around these forests were happy because they provided them with honey, wood and fresh milk (for their livestock could graze freely). Over time the people became greedy, however, and the increasingly corrupt Sindh Forest Department whose job it was to maintain these precious forests turned a blind eye. Today, most of these riverine forests have disappeared – cut down for their virgin agricultural land.

On a recent visit to interior Sindh, I found myself standing on an embankment near the city of Nawabshah, staring out at the barren landscape which stretched for miles below – these sandy dunes were the remains of the once vast Mari Forest, cut down in the last eight years by the local people.

Over the years, the Mari forest had started deteriorating since the reduction of freshwater in the lower Indus Basin has resulted in drying out these forests. With more diversion of water upstream, there is less water in the river as it nears the delta. “Nearly 50 per cent of the forest was naturally gone and 50 per cent cut down by the people. The forest used to stretch for 50 km and now nothing is left. It is all gone,” pointed out a local villager.

The story does not end here – in a cruel twist of fate, the once fertile land (the forest even used to produce seasonal crops) has become barren. The local people who had cut down the forest for agricultural land have now discovered that they cannot grow any crops since there is hardly any fresh water in the area. The groundwater levels have also dropped and they simply cannot afford to install tube-wells. So now they have nothing.

the  
truth is



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There is no livestock (since they no longer have the forest for free fodder), no trees, no honey and plus no water. They are now looking around for work in an area where unemployment is already very high. The ghost of Mari forest had its final revenge, I suppose.

There must be so many other forests in the area which might meet the same fate as the Mari forest. Apparently 90 per cent of the riverine forests are today either under un-authorized possession or leased to local influential people on nominal government rates.

This lease policy was started as recently as 2005 and the Forest Department made a lot of money by collecting the revenue from leasing out forest land for five years but essentially that land is gone now.

Just across from the now extinct Mari forest, however, lies another much smaller forest called Pai forest which is spread over 1,500 hectares. This has somehow survived the ravages of time – perhaps because it is a designated game reserve and the Forest Department has managed to protect it (although there have been encroachments by the army and the Agricultural Department). The Pai forest was once a natural riverine forest but it got separated from the Indus River when a flood protection embankment was built along the banks, and now it is an irrigated forest ecosystem.

However, it still has many of the same tree species one would find in a riverine forest: Bahan, Babul, Kikar and Kandi. There are also some hog deer left in the forest, along with partridges, jackals, foxes and jungle cats.

However, the Pai forest is also facing threats, there is a shortage of water in the Shahbaz minor canal which provides it with irrigation and the local villagers cut its trees for fuel wood. They also graze their animals in the forest, damaging the young trees. However, the Indus For All programme, which is being implemented by WWF-Pakistan, is organising the local communities who live around the forest, to protect the area.

The local people have become so aware, that recently when some outsiders tried to enter the forest and cut the trees, the local people fought with them and chased them off. The programme would like to initiate controlled and sustainable hunting in the forest, from which the local communities can benefit.

The programme is also turning the elegant old rest-house in the forest (built during Ayub Khan's era when the VIPs would come and spend the night in the forest and hunt over 500 partridges in one day!) into an information centre for visitors. They are also thinking of building a watch tower (equipped with binoculars) and a proper gate entrance to this small but well maintained forest. The Forest Department has already signed an MoU and is willing to cooperate.

At least the Pai forest is being conserved – what about the other remaining forests? “This is just the start for us – we have identified other forests upstream from Sukkur which can be saved as well. Unfortunately, downstream from Sukkur till the delta, not much is left,” says Usama Anwar, the site manager for the programme. Let's hope that the new government of Sindh will help the Indus For All programme in saving what's left of these riverine forests.

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