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Many Species, One Planet, One Future

23 May 2010, 11:00 hrs IST, Narayani Ganesh, TNN

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NEW DELHI: Addressing a national seminar on International Biodiversity Day in New Delhi -- on biodiversity, development and poverty alleviation in the context of climate change - minister of state for environment and forests, Jairam Ramesh said: "We need to bring about convergence between biodiversity and climate change as each affects the other; it's a two-way relationship." At meetings both at Nagoya, Japan, in October this year and in Cancun, Mexico next year, India would push for a 31-article negotiating text that would help converge talks on biodiversity and climate change. The minister hopes that the said text would become fully negotiated before the Cop-11 meeting in 2012.

In recognition of India's contribution in this regard, the eleventh Conference of Parties (COP-11) of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change will be held in New Delhi in the year 2012, marking the 20th anniversary of the signing of the international Convention on Biodiversity (CBD) in 1992. India is not only being proactive in acknowledging the symbiotic link between biodiversity and climate change; it was also trying to bring together the CBD and TRIPPS agreement of the WTO through pushing for an amendment of Article 29. The article amendment seeks to include concerns of India and other developing countries with regard to their biological resources, particularly their use in the pharmaceutical industry.

The minister reiterated that while international negotiations and protocols were relevant, what was more pertinent was domestic action that benefited local communities. The National Biodiversity Authority (NBDA) set up in Chennai under the chairmanship of P. L. Gautam has signed agreements with 80 private companies who are using biological resources for local communities' benefit. The first such agreement to go operational was the one with Pepsi, exporting seaweeds. The Rs 38 lakh profit was distributed to the local community.

More than 120 research institutions and 250 scientists have been roped in to forming the Indian Network for Climate Change Assessment (INCCA), "an Indian version of the International Panel on Climate Change," informed Jairam Ramesh who went on to say that for the first time in India since 1994, it released an inventory of greenhouse gases 2007, making India the first developing country to publish updated figures on internal emissions.

As far as traditional knowledge goes, under director-general R. A. Mashelkar's leadership, the Council of Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR) had set up the Traditional Knowledge Digital Library (TKDL) in 2001. With an investment of Rs 10 crore, the TKDL has nearly 150 texts of Ayurveda, Siddha, Yoga and Unani systems of medicine uploaded on its website, containing 2,19,000 medicinal formulations. It was because of TKDL that patents granted by the European Patents Office to Neem formulations and by the US patent office to Turmeric were all cancelled. Last month, Avesta Gen applied to the European Patents office with reference to the Dhananjay Tree (Terminalia Arjuna) that contains medicinal properties that can cure heart problems, diabetes and other diseases. This attempt, too, failed because of TKDL stepping in. "Every year, at least 1,500 patents are granted worldwide in Indian systems of medicine," informed Jairam Ramesh.

Since the bulk of India's biodiversity is in forests, the REDD Plus programme - Reducing Emissions From Deforestation and Forest Degradation - assumes great significance, said the minister who pointed out that under the National Action Plan on Climate Change, the Green India Mission seeks to double the rate of afforestation and eco restoration. "In a business-as-usual scenario, we would have achieved afforestation to the extent of 10 mha (million hectares) but now that goal would be 10+10, that is, 20 mha, so that we also meet our goals of being able to sequester carbon in forests, and also restore mangroves that are disappearing - all without excluding locals and tribals from forest areas. Currently India's forest cover is 69% of which 40% are degraded cover and so we need to improve quality and not just quantity," he said.

Dr Gautam said that the NBDA had three goals: Conservation, institutional development and equitable sharing of biological resources. While efforts are on to review progress, reduce biodiversity loss and prepare a roadmap, a special stamp would be released on World Environment Day celebrations on June 5 this year with the following theme: Many Species, One Planet, One Future.

"It is in our own interests to protect our biodiversity and if in the process we are also fulfilling international requirements, we should see that as a collateral benefit," said Jairam Ramesh. "The biggest challenge is strengthening more than 100 year-old institutions like the Botanical and Zoological Surveys of India and infusing youth component in their management."

The seminar was organized by UNDP, NBDA and TERI with participation of the ministry of environment and forests.

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