

Pakistan's plan for tackling deforestation: A billion trees

By **Max Bearak** May 18, 2016

It's a rough life in Pakistan, even for a tree.

The country's hills were once home to endless stretches of pine and fir, but these days Pakistan's forest cover is somewhere below 2 percent. In the United States, that number is roughly 33 percent and in India 23 percent.

In an ambitious plan to counter this deforestation, which ecologists say is a major cause of deadly landslides, the government of a province along Pakistan's restive border with Afghanistan says it is a quarter of the way to a goal announced last year: planting 1 billion saplings. The so-called Billion Tree Tsunami campaign was recognized by the Bonn Challenge, a global partnership of forestry ministries to regain green cover.

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Landslides killed 140 this April alone and destroyed hundreds of villages in northern Pakistan. Trees' roots help to keep soil in its place. Without them, hillsides more easily erode, and heavy mountain rain can bring whole slopes down — trees, boulders and all.

“The KP government has committed to not only reversing the high rate of deforestation but also shifting the current philosophy of treating forests as ‘revenue’ machines towards preserving them as valued ‘natural capital,’” Malik Amin, an environmentalist who advises the government of Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa province, explained to thethirdpole.net.

"Timber mafias," as well as Afghan refugees and local themselves, have chopped down immense swaths of forest. Many in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (once known as Northwest Frontier Province) don't have electricity, or don't get it regularly, and use wood fires for lighting, cooking and warmth. The so-called mafia refers to those who cut trees without a permit, and allegations that politicians engage in that business are common in Pakistan.

The provincial government has reportedly given \$150 million to the project, which has raised 250 million saplings, and is shooting for a billion. To put that in context, an forestry expert interviewed two years ago by my colleague Tim Craig, The Washington Post's Islamabad bureau chief, said that Pakistan needs to plant between 1.5 and 2 *trillion* saplings to reverse the deforestation since its independence in 1947.

Besides the fact that a billion trees may actually be insufficient, some ecologists have said that the provincial government, which is controlled by Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf, the party of populist politician and former cricket star Imran Khan, has mismanaged the project and the benefits will be scarce.

"Undoubtedly, the tree plantation campaign is a wonderful initiative, but our main concern is that the PTI-led government has identified wrong species for wrong places," Lal Badshah, an ecologist and assistant professor in the Botany Department at the University of Peshawar, told News Lens Pakistan. Non-native species, he said, could negatively impact surrounding flora, and birds were unlikely to use the trees for nesting.

Locals have complained to Pakistani media that the whole program puts them at an economic disadvantage. The region is one of Pakistan's poorest, and many rely on what's left of the forest for income. If they couldn't cut the trees for wood, some said, then new trees should produce fruit, which could be sold to buy wood. Reports indicated most of the trees in the "tsunami" would be pines.

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Max Bearak writes about foreign affairs for the Washington Post. Previously, he reported from South Asia for the New York Times and others. [!\[\]\(6059a5aa8b4ca7bb793408023d6c6e42_img.jpg\) Follow @maxbearak](#)

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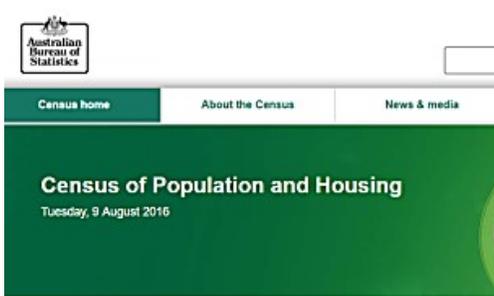
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