

# Illegal Tree Felling Threatens Mussoorie's Green Cover

As darkness falls on the forests of Khatta Pani, a group of young able-bodied men make their way deeper into the woods. They have found a way to make a fast buck in the winter: felling a tree and selling it off as firewood.

Felling of trees is illegal in the hill station but it is rampant in the forests of Mussoorie. The men know they are on the wrong side of the law but the trade is quite lucrative. A quintal of firewood can fetch as much as Rs 1,200 on cold winter days.

"A big log easily goes for Rs 1,500 to Rs 2,000 especially on very cold days," said Rakesh (name changed), who is involved in the unlawful activity.

"It takes 5 to 6 hours at least to cut a big tree. Once we have chopped it, we cut it into further parts and hide it behind bushes. Then a few days later, we collect these pieces," according to Rakesh's partner.

The duo often goes to Khatta Pani, about 4 km from Mussoorie. An average of one to five trees are felled each day during winter months. Trees are felled in Kempty area, Khatta Pani and some forest area below Lal Tibba road. The trees are cut into smaller pieces and sold off to provide warmth to innumerable hotels and bungalows.

TOI observed two men felling a tree in Kempty area and also carefully removing all signs of it.

"We need to bury signs of the tree," said Hukam Singh, who was busy pulling out the roots of the tree and covering the area with stones. Singh said he is from a village in Kempty and felled the tree to use it for "cooking purposes".

Sher Bahadur, who was helping Hukam, confessed that he cuts trees often for a sum of Rs 250 a day. "It's an eight hour job and I cut as many trees as I can," he said.

A local who did not wish to be named shared that at least 25-30 trees have been cut in the Kempty area in the past few days.

Dr Dheeraj Pandey, divisional forest officer says, "It's difficult to keep a check on such wide forest area. There is revenue land, civil forest, cantt area, and municipal council area. The number of guards we have is limited." Besides a lush forest cover, Mussoorie also has more than 200 private forest estates, some of which are often targets of illegal tree felling.

Asha Ram, who gets bamboo to make brooms and baskets from jungles around Chhandi and Jharipani forests, says he can see the green cover shrinking. "There is so much the forests give us and yet we are being careless about them. The way trees are being cut is scary."

"It's sad that illicit felling is happening in Mussoorie. The forest guard in Landour cantt retired over a decade ago and there is no one to take care of forests in Landour, " said author and photographer Ganesh Saili.

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