REPORT

A Report on the INSEE–IIT Mandi International Conference on "Ecological Restoration for a Resilient Society: Economics, Policies, and Institutions"

Shyamasree Dasgupta,[*] Seema Purushothaman[**]

The Thirteenth Biennial Conference of the Indian Society for Ecological Economics (INSEE) on "Ecological Restoration for a Resilient Society: Economics, Policies, and Institutions" was held at the Indian Institute of Technology Mandi (IIT Mandi), Himachal Pradesh, India, from 12 to 14 January 2026. The conference brought together relevant stakeholders to engage in thoughtful dialogue over three days. It was preceded by a pre-conference workshop on 11 January 2026, titled "Tools and Methods for Decision-Making on Ecological Restoration", and was followed by a post-conference fieldwork on 15 January 2026. The conference was supported by International Development Research Centre (IDRC Canada), the Foundation for Ecological Security (FES), and the Indian Council for Social Science Research (ICSSR).

The United Nations has declared 2021–2030 as the Decade on Ecosystem Restoration with "aims to prevent, halt and reverse the degradation of ecosystems on every continent and in the ocean" (United Nations n.d.). According to the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification, a large portion of the world's land is already degraded, and this degradation is worsening rapidly (UNCCD n.d.). India is no exception to the trend, with

[*] Associate Professor in Economics, School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Indian Institute of Technology, Mandi 175005, India; Organising Secretary of INSEE Thirteenth Biennial Conference and Secretary, INSEE (2024-26); shyamasree@iitmandi.ac.in ✉

[**] Economist, (Formerly with) Asoka Trust for Research in Ecology and the Environment (ATREE), Royal Enclave, Jakkur, Bangalore - 560064, India; President, INSEE (2024–26); seema.purushothaman@gmail.com

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an estimated 96.4 million hectares of land experiencing desertification and degradation (MoEFCC 2023).

Restoring degraded ecosystems to their functional and productive state, while ensuring equitable and sustainable access for the resource-poor, is critical for progressive development. However, many questions about such ecological restoration remain to be tackled before targets can be specified and significant resources are committed. The conference in January 2026 brought together various stakeholders to deliberate on such questions, laying the groundwork for equitable and sustainable land restoration efforts in the country.

Figure 1: Pre-Conference Workshop Session on "Tools and Methods for Decision-Making on Ecological Restoration", 11 January 2026, IIT Mandi

Source*:* Conference Organizing Committee

Figure 2: During the Post-Conference Field Visit on 15 January 2026, Mandi, Himachal Pradesh

Source*:* Conference Organizing Committee

The pre-conference workshop was designed to introduce participants to practical tools, methods, and decision-making frameworks to support inclusive and context-specific ecological restoration. On the post-conference day, the workshop participants were divided into groups for fieldwork in two locations—Chhipanu and Surahan in Mandi district. The fieldwork, organised in collaboration with FES and the Forest Department of Mandi, was designed to enable participants to explore on-the-ground challenges and opportunities when applying the decision-making tools. It concluded with a debriefing session. By combining hands-on field engagement with exposure to decision-making tools, the workshop aimed to strengthen participants' capacity to design context-specific ecological restoration strategies.

Figure 3: Seema Purushothaman's Presidential Address *(left)* and Shyam Masakapalli's Welcome Address *(right)* at the Inaugural Session on 12 January 2026

Source*:* Conference Organizing Committee

In her presidential address at the inaugural session on 12 January 2026, Seema Purushothaman discussed how ecological economics emerged from discontent with the unfulfilled promises of economic growth and the consequent need to reconfigure the system that delivers essentials, conveniences, and intangibles to humanity. While ecological economics acquires different foci in different regions, she contends that a basic tenet remains: the need to push the boundaries of sustainability science to evolve a rigorous trans-disciplinary pathway towards realizing an inclusive, equitable, and resilient society.

The welcome address on behalf of the hosting institute was delivered by Shyam Masakapalli, professor and dean, Sponsored Research and Industrial Consultancy, IIT Mandi, and Manu Devadevan, associate professor, School of Humanities and Social Sciences, IIT Mandi. A video tribute was presented to Madhav Gadgil, who passed away just before the conference,

honouring his immeasurable contributions to the field of ecology and inclusive conservation governance.

This year, INSEE conferred the title of INSEE Fellow on CK Varshney and Jyoti Parikh, founding members of INSEE, in recognition of their outstanding contributions to ecological economics and allied fields. The event was a part of the inaugural session.

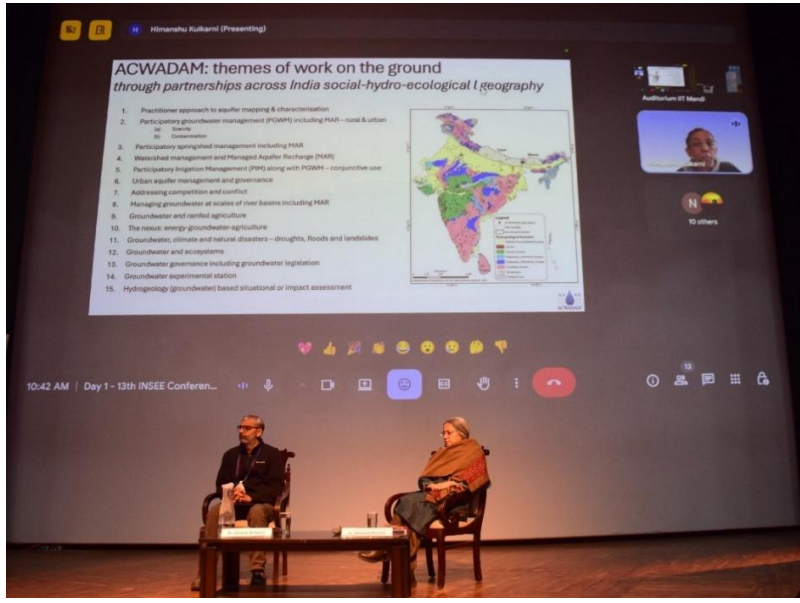
Figure 4: Video Tribute to Madhav Gadgil at the Inaugural Session on 12 January 2026

Source*:* Conference Organizing Committee

On the inaugural day, the Second Jayanta Bandyopadhyay Endowment Lecture—set up by the former INSEE president and founding editor of *Ecology, Economy and Society–the INSEE Journal*—was delivered remotely by Himanshu Kulkarni (Advanced Center for Water Resources Development and Management, ACWADAM). Titled "Groundwater, Society, and Ecosystems: Addressing Complex Trade-offs", his lecture emphasized the value of aquifers—an often overlooked but vital resource—and explained why reviving springs is a crucial step in restoring ecosystems, as evidenced by differing groundwater levels beneath forests versus urban land. The lecture also suggested how this priority might be reflected in groundwater governance and policy. Kulkarni's lecture was followed by a panel discussion on water governance and restoration, featuring two speakers working at the interface of gender and water-related issues. Anamika Barua (IIT Guwahati) discussed a case study on Deepor Beel, and Malavika

Chauhan (Centre for Ecology Development and Research, CEDAR) shared insights from her extensive experience in rural development, environmental sustainability, and civil society engagement, particularly in the Himalayan region.

Figure 5: Second Jayanta Bandyopadhyay Endowment Lecture by Himanshu Kulkarni on 12 January 2026



Source*:* Conference Organizing Committee

Figure 6: Release of the Conference Abstract Book at the Inaugural Session on 12 January 2026

Source*:* Conference Organizing Committee

The conference hosted four keynote addresses. The first two addresses were delivered remotely by Pushpam Kumar (United Nations Environment Programme, UNEP), former secretary of INSEE, and Muralee Thummarukudy (UNCCD) on 13 January 2026; they spoke on the economics of restoration, focusing on the integration of ecological concerns into policy frameworks and economic systems.

In his talk on "Mainstreaming Biodiversity into Economics and Finance", Kumar highlighted the need to internalize biodiversity and ecosystem concerns in decision-making on finance and economics, so that harmful subsidies can be avoided across production, distribution, and consumption processes. He emphasized the need for a robust legal and institutional regulatory framework, without which financial mobilization would be challenging.

Speaking on the "Restoration Economy", Thummarukudy noted that although environmental economics has come a long way since its inception as a formal discipline, it is still far from attaining universal application as a tool in decision-making. In his current role as the director of the G20 Global Initiative on Land Restoration at the UNCCD, he emphasized that in peri-urban areas, land restoration can always be left to market forces, and public investment should instead be deployed in areas without a functional market.

On the same day, the third keynote address, titled "Financing Ecological Restoration", was delivered by Rohini Chaturvedi (an independent consultant). She highlighted three non-negotiables for achieving global ecological restoration goals. The first is scale, as small interventions are insufficient to generate meaningful ecological outcomes. The second is the selection of the right place and the use of the right tool, as uniform solutions do not lead to desirable outcomes. And the third is adopting a people-centric approach, with local communities involved at all stages of decision-making.

The final keynote address was on "Regenerative Agriculture and Restoration", delivered by Harpinder Sandhu (Federation University, Australia) on 14 January 2026. Drawing on his decades of experience in agriculture and food systems, he highlighted that agri-food systems cannot be attributed solely to farming but should be understood as integrated networks that link the economy, society, and ecology. He also critiqued the limitations of GDP-centric approaches and commented on the lack of indicators measuring social capital and ecological wealth.

The conference hosted two panel discussions. The discussion on "Resource Use Efficiency and Circular Economy in Ecological Restoration for

Business Action", chaired by Bhim Adhikari (IDRC, Canada), on 12 January 2026, explored the intersection of ecological restoration and business responsibilities. The panellists were Deepak Malghan (IIM Bangalore), Visal Singh (CEDAR), and Aditya Petwal (Centre for Responsible Business, CRB). The panel shared diverse perspectives on the circular economy and on resource-use efficiency.

Figure 7: IDRC-CRB Panel Discussion on 12 January 2026

Source*:* Conference Organizing Committee

The panel on "Forest Restoration and Its Impacts – Evidence from South Asia", on 13 January 2026, was conducted by the IDRC and the South Asian Network for Development and Environmental Economics (SANDEE, instituted by the International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development, ICIMOD). Chaired by Bhim Adhikari, the panel featured Mani Nepal (ICIMOD-SANDEE, Kathmandu), Erandathie Pathiraja (Institute of Policy Studies, Colombo), and Naya Paudel (Forest Action, Nepal), and drew on the ongoing IDRC project on Economics of Forest Restoration in South Asia. The panellists presented facts and figures from restoration activities undertaken across the South Asian countries of Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Nepal.

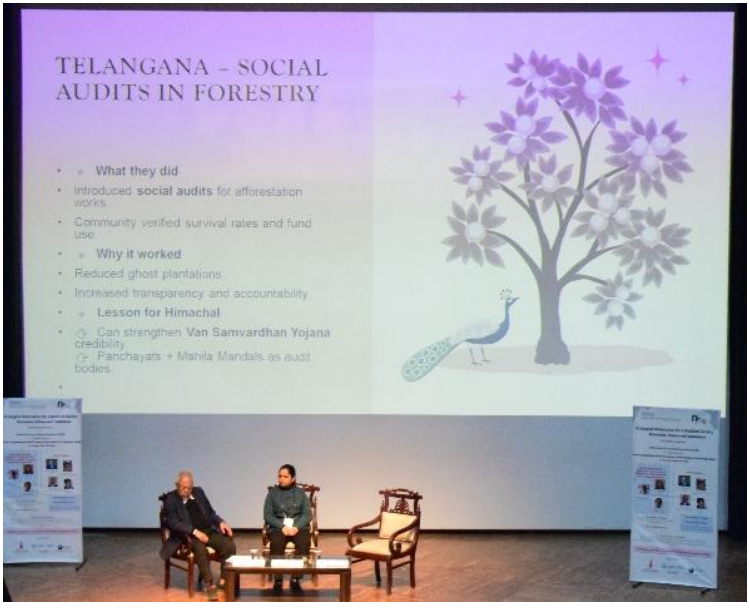
Additionally, on 12 January 2026, there was a dialogue between the representatives of the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) and the Forest Department of Himachal Pradesh on "Ecological Restoration in the Indian Himalayan Region". This led to a

wider discussion on forest restoration and the roles of funding agencies, forest departments, and the community.

Figure 8: IDRC-SANDEE Panel Discussion on 13 January 2026

Source*:* Conference Organizing Committee

Figure 9: Dialogue between GIZ and Forest Department of Himachal Pradesh on 12 January 2026



Source*:* Conference Organizing Committee

A total of 25 oral presentations were delivered across seven thematic sessions on 13 and 14 January 2026. Each presentation was followed by comments from designated discussants and an engaging discussion with the audience. The conference received 126 paper submissions, which were reviewed by a 30-member Scientific Advisory Committee. In addition, the programme also featured two video presentations on 12 January 2026, showcasing innovative approaches to ecological restoration.

In the first video presentation, "Restoring an Urban Lake: Design Principles for a Participatory Socio-Ecological Restoration through a Transdisciplinary Approach", the team from Ashoka Trust for Research in Ecology and the Environment (ATREE) shared a case study of the restoration of a neighbourhood lake in Bengaluru using a participatory and transdisciplinary socio-ecological approach. Drawing on field-based experiences, the presentation highlighted the use of community mapping, biodiversity walks, and storytelling practices to engage residents and inform restoration priorities.

The second presentation was by FES on "Bridging Community Knowledge and Scientific Tools for Landscape Restoration: A Case from the Semi-Arid Kalyanpura Watershed, Rajasthan". It provided a visual representation of the watershed region, which features extensive green spaces, and explained how the local community was introduced to digital instruments for local planning, such as a groundwater monitoring tool. It also featured testimonials from residents who observed the long-term benefits of community engagement in the construction of anicuts and the transfer of other skills.

On 14 January 2026, a discussion on the book *Environmental Studies from India: Engaging with the Planetary Ecological Crisis*), edited by Sudha Vasan (University of Delhi) (Vasan 2025), took place. Saumya Malviya (IIT Mandi) was the reviewer. Nandan Nawn (Jawaharlal Nehru University and Jamia Millia Islamia) offered a summary of his chapter in the book.

A dedicated session on *Ecology, Economy, and Society–the INSEE Journal*—titled "Views from Inside: Making of a Scopus-Indexed COPE Member EES and How the Editorial Process Works"—was conducted by Nandan Nawn (executive editor) and Sudha Vasan (editor) on 13 January 2026.

The final session of the conference was titled "INSEE@25 and Beyond: A Conversation with Past INSEE Presidents" and took place in a hybrid mode on 14 January 2026. Moderated by Seema Purushothaman, the session unfolded as a thoughtful dialogue. The session reminisced on INSEE's origins and its journey so far and also charted possible future paths. Former presidents Jayanta Bandyopadhyay and Gopal Kadekodi

traced the journal's history and offered suggestions for the future. Former INSEE presidents, KN Ninan, Nilanjan Ghosh, and Amita Shah, also shared their thoughts. The younger members of INSEE then shared their expectations from the society.

As the world enters the latter half of the UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration, the conference emphasised the urgency of translating relevant knowledge into inclusive policies and on-ground action. It reaffirmed INSEE's role as a platform for fostering critical dialogue and collaborative solutions for a more resilient and equitable future.

Figure 10: Participants in the XIII INSEE Biennial Conference at IIT Mandi, 12 January 2026

Source*:* Conference Organizing Committee

Ethics Statement: This study complies with requirements of ethical approvals from the institutional ethics committee for the conduct of this research.

Data Availability Statement: The work is related to reporting of the 13th INSEE Biennial Conference on "Ecological Restoration for a Resilient Society: Economics, Policies, and Institutions" and hence is not associated to any such data. However, the information on registration, participation and program schedule and other conference-related details are available with the Conference Organizers and could be furnished upon request.

Conflict of Interest Statement: No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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