

Navy launches drive to plant million mangroves

By Faiza Ilyas

KARACHI: Efforts to save the fast-vanishing mangrove forests received a major boost on Monday when the Pakistan Navy launched a campaign to plant one million mangrove saplings along the coast of Sindh and Balochistan in six months.

The campaign, which coincided with International Day of Forests, kicked off at a ceremony held in Younasabad. It was attended by a large number of students, PN officers, government officials and nature conservationists.

“The campaign is in line with the prime minister’s green Pakistan initiative. It will help reduce marine pollution levels, increase livelihood opportunities and lead to awareness about the important role mangrove forests play in the marine ecosystem,” said Chief of the Naval Staff Admiral Mohammad Zakauallah during his brief speech.

He urged the people to support the PN’s efforts. “Despite the immense benefits mangrove provide to our marine ecosystem, their number is fast declining. We need to act together and help save this natural resource. Planting trees is a religious obligation, too.”

Mangroves, he said, would be planted along the entire coast, which had recently been scientifically measured by the Space and Upper Atmosphere Research Commission in collaboration with the PN and found it to be slightly over 1,000 kilometers.

He also lauded the collaboration of the forest departments of Sindh and Balochistan, the International Union for Conservation of Nature and the World Wide Fund for Nature-Pakistan in the mangrove plantation campaign.

Inspector general of forests Syed Mahmood Nasir said it was important to

understand the link between water and forests, which was the theme of this year’s International Day of Forests.

Pakistan was fortunate to be an exporter of sugar, rice and wheat despite being largely a dry land, he said. “But we have our set of challenges and problems, too. One of them is the loss of precious plant species, for instance river poplar, which is called *ubhan* in Sindhi. Once found in abundance, the species is rare now. It’s truly hardy, can tolerate high saline levels and was used in furniture making,” he said while explaining that his team found that the same plant was grown along the Great Wall of China.

Indigenous plants, he said, needed to be conserved and propagated instead of growing exotic species. The miracle tree, known as *Sohanjana ki phalli* in local parlance, had tremendous health benefits that should be disseminated among the public.

Highlighting the steps taken by the federal government to improve environmental conditions, he said though no major success had been achieved, a number of measures had been taken at the policy level that included recommendation to the provinces to set up their respective wetland management authorities.

On mangroves, he said: “We have lost the diversity in mangroves as we are left with only two species. To those who would ask why we need to protect them, I would say that it’s our responsibility to preserve and pass on the species to the next generation as our forefathers protected them for us and we relished their benefits.”

The PM’s initiative was not just about planting and growing more trees, but involved protection of all animal species which thrived in their habitats.

On the impact of climate change the country is experiencing, he said foreign experts had suggested that the water received during heavy rainfalls should be conserved, which in turn would improve

the level of groundwater.

IUCN country representative Mahmood Akhtar Cheema said the PN had set an example which had been received very positively internationally.

Speaking about the IUCN’s efforts, he said Pakistan was made part of the Mangrove for Future in 2010 and the organisation was now involved in 26 small projects, all focused on the coastal areas. Plantation of mangroves on 50,000 hectares was in progress in Sindh while planning was under way in Balochistan to start mangrove plantation there.

“It’s easy to plant a sapling but difficult to sustain it to the point that it benefit people. I hope that together we can meet this challenge,” he said, wishing success to the programme.

Earlier, coast commander Rear Admiral Waseem Akram welcomed the guests.

The mangrove forest cover spread over 132,000 acres along Pakistan’s coast is supporting communities and protecting the coastline in many different ways.

“They are among the most productive and complex ecosystems on the planet, growing under environmental conditions that would kill ordinary plants. They are vital to coastal ecosystem, prevention of sea intrusion and sustainment of marine life. Unfortunately over the years, mangroves along the Pakistani coast have diminished due to negligence and apathy of all concerned,” he said.

“Being a major stakeholder of the maritime domain and realising the importance of mangroves for marine life, Pakistan Navy has taken a major initiative to revive mangrove forests all along the coast.”

The plant growth would be monitored in coming years and efforts would be taken with community support for awareness on mangroves, he said.

The speeches were followed by plantation of mangrove saplings at selected sites.



PAKISTAN Navy staff and students plant mangrove saplings at a selected site in Younasabad on Monday.—White Star