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Green Walls and Hard Lessons: What China Teaches India About Fighting Deserts

 **THE HINDU**

17 July 2026

ENVIRONMENT**GS3**

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The Hindu

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THE LIFT LINE

A forest planted for a photograph is not the same as land brought back to life, and China's long war against its deserts teaches India that the difference between the two is measured in decades, native roots and political patience.

WHY THIS EDITORIAL MATTERS FOR YOUR EXAM

China's programme to push back its expanding drylands is often cited as the world's most ambitious greening effort, and it has delivered real, satellite-visible gains in sand-fixation and vegetation cover. Yet the closer one looks, the clearer it becomes that those gains rested on **sustained political commitment**, heavy irrigation, and a run of relatively favourable rainfall, as much as on planting technique. For India, staring at a degrading **Aravalli** range and an advancing **Thar**, the honest lesson is not "plant more trees" but "restore ecosystems, and keep at it".

GS Paper 3: conservation, land degradation and environmental restoration are core to the environment and ecology syllabus. For **Prelims**, hold the specifics: **desertification** is land degradation in arid, semi-arid and dry sub-humid areas; the **United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD)** was adopted in **1994** with its secretariat in **Bonn, Germany**; India has committed to **Land Degradation Neutrality (LDN)** and pledged to restore **26 million hectares** of degraded land by **2030**; the **Desertification and Land Degradation Atlas** is produced by **ISRO's Space Applications Centre (SAC)**; the **Aravalli Green Wall Project** is India's flagship green-belt effort along the Aravalli landscape; and the **Great Green Wall of the Sahara and Sahel** is a separate African Union initiative, not to be confused with China's programme. For **Mains**, the argument is that greening must be **ecologically sound**, native-species-based and community-led, not merely tree-count driven.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

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China began systematic anti-desertification work in the late twentieth century as sandstorms choked its northern cities and farmland retreated before advancing dunes. Over successive decades it deployed shelterbelts, sand-fixing grids, aerial seeding and vast plantation drives. Independent monitoring confirms that vegetation cover rose and some deserts stopped expanding, a genuine achievement given the scale.

But the programme also drew hard criticism. Early phases leaned on fast-growing **monoculture** (<https://ujiyari.com/vocab/monoculture/>) plantations, often poplar and other thirsty species, which depleted groundwater, proved vulnerable to pests and sometimes died en masse. The gains that endured came where planting shifted toward **native, drought-adapted species**, grasslands and mixed restoration, and where the state kept funding the effort year after year rather than declaring victory early.

THE CORE ARGUMENT / ISSUE

The measurable gain, honestly stated

China did reverse degradation on significant tracts and cut sandstorm frequency around key corridors. That is real and should not be dismissed. The point is what made it work: continuity of funding, coordinated administration, and a late but crucial move away from single-species plantations toward ecosystem restoration.

The hidden costs of tree-counting

A programme judged by **trees planted** rather than **land healed** rewards the wrong thing. Monocultures raise cover statistics while draining aquifers and collapsing biodiversity. When a plantation dies in a drought year, the “gain” reverses. Ecological restoration, by contrast, rebuilds soil, water retention and native food-webs that survive without permanent irrigation.

Reading the lesson for India

DIMENSION	PLANTATION-DRIVEN GREENING	ECOSYSTEM RESTORATION
Metric	Trees planted, area covered	Soil health, water table, biodiversity
Species	Fast-growing monoculture	Native, drought-adapted mix
Water demand	High, irrigation-dependent	Low, rainfall-matched
Durability	Fragile in drought and pest years	Self-sustaining once established
Ownership	Top-down, contract-based	Community stewardship

India's **Aravalli Green Wall Project** and Thar-edge efforts will be judged by the right-hand column, or they will repeat the left-hand column's mistakes.

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HOW TO THINK ABOUT THIS (ANALYTICAL FRAME)

Apply a **restore-versus-cover** test to any greening scheme. Ask three questions. First, **which species**: native and mixed, or a single fast-growing import? Second, **what water budget**: does the planting live on natural rainfall, or does it borrow groundwater the region cannot spare? Third, **who owns it**: are local and forest-dwelling communities stewards with a stake, or is it a contractor's one-time job? A scheme that answers "native, rainfall-matched, community-owned" is restoration; one that answers otherwise is landscaping that will not last.

THE DIAGRAM IN WORDS

Advancing desert -> political decision to green -> choice point: monoculture plantation vs native restoration -> monoculture path leads to groundwater loss and die-back -> native, community-led path leads to soil recovery and durable cover -> sustained funding decides whether either survives

WAY FORWARD

- ① **Restore ecosystems, do not just plant trees.** Anchor the Aravalli Green Wall in **native, drought-adapted species** and grassland recovery, measuring success by soil moisture and biodiversity, not sapling counts.
- ② **Match greening to the water budget.** Prioritise rainfall-fed restoration and watershed works so plantations do not mine the very **groundwater** that keeps drylands alive.
- ③ **Make communities the stewards.** Tie restoration to livelihoods and rights of local and forest-dependent people, since **community ownership** is what keeps trees alive between funding cycles.
- ④ **Guarantee continuity and monitoring.** Fund restoration across decades, not electoral cycles, and track it through **ISRO's Desertification Atlas** to hold the programme to India's **26-million-hectare LDN pledge**.

PYQ LINKAGE AND PRACTICE

This connects to UPSC Mains questions on land degradation and desertification in India (GS3), on afforestation and its ecological pitfalls, and to the recurring prelims theme of the UNCCD, LDN targets and India's restoration commitments. The 2016 question on the causes and consequences of land degradation feeds directly here.

Practice question: “Successful anti-desertification is measured by ecosystems restored, not trees planted.”

Examine this statement with reference to global experience and India’s Aravalli Green Wall Project. (250 words, 15 marks)

Sources: The Hindu editorial on desertification and green walls (<https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/editorial/>), UN Convention to Combat Desertification (<https://www.unccd.int/>), ISRO Space Applications Centre Desertification Atlas (<https://www.sac.gov.in/>)

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