Report on Tree Removal, Paper Mulberry Eradication, and Land Clearing Activites in Islamabad

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This report consolidates findings from WWF-Pakistan's field inspections on tree cutting and land clearing activities in Islamabad with key policy, health, and ecological considerations related to the ongoing removal of Paper Mulberry (Broussonetia papyrifera) and cutting of trees for construction of infrastructure. The report aims to provide a balanced, evidence-based assessment for senior management and relevant authorities.

1. Background and Context

Between December 2025 and January 2026, extensive tree cutting and land clearing activities were widely reported through social and formal media across multiple locations in the Islamabad Capital Territory (ICT), including Shakarparian, Lok Virsa, the National Museum precinct, the Islamabad Expressway (H-8), and the Margalla Enclave Link Road near the National Institutes of Health (NIH). Several of these activities are associated with major infrastructure development works, including road construction and monument-related projects, resulting in large-scale clearance of trees and natural vegetation.

Given Islamabad's planned identity as a green city and the ecological significance of its urban forests and green corridors, WWF-Pakistan initiated field verification to assess the nature, scale, and underlying drivers of these activities, and to distinguish between vegetation removal linked to infrastructure development and that undertaken for public-health purposes.

In parallel, the Capital Development Authority (CDA) has been implementing a federally mandated programme to remove Paper Mulberry (Broussonetia papyrifera), an invasive and highly allergenic species, across selected parts of Islamabad. This programme is primarily driven by public health concerns related to severe spring pollen allergies and is supported by expert recommendations and judicial directives. However, WWF-Pakistan's field observations indicate that a portion of the tree and vegetation loss observed during this period is attributable to infrastructure construction activities rather than targeted Paper Mulberry eradication, underscoring the need for differentiated assessment, transparency, and appropriate environmental safeguards.

2. Objectives of the Assessment

The integrated assessment was undertaken to: (i) identify sites where tree removal and land clearing are occurring; (ii) distinguish between Paper Mulberry removal and other forms of vegetation clearing; (iii) understand the stated purpose of tree removal; (iv) review replantation and restoration measures; and (v) document concerns and opportunities for improved ecological outcomes.

3. Methodology

A two-member forestry team from WWF-Pakistan conducted site visits, recorded GPS coordinates, documented physical conditions through photographs, and held informal discussions with on-site labour and CDA staff. Findings from these visits were triangulated with official information and a parallel review of the CDA's Paper Mulberry removal programme.

4. Policy and Health Rationale: Paper Mulberry Removal

Paper Mulberry (Broussonetia papyrifera) has been identified by environmental and medical experts as a major contributor to seasonal pollen allergies in Islamabad, causing allergic rhinitis, asthma, and related respiratory issues. Under directives from the Prime Minister's Office and public health authorities, CDA launched a structured programme to systematically remove this species from parks, greenbelts, and public spaces.

Official sources indicate that more than 29,000 Paper Mulberry trees have been removed city-wide, including from Shakarparian, Fatima Jinnah Park (F-9), and greenbelts along Park Road and the H-8 Expressway. The programme is reportedly guided by earlier Supreme Court directions permitting removal of invasive or allergenic species, subject to expert oversight and compensatory plantation.

5. Site-Wise Observations from WWF Field Visits

5.1 Shakarparian Link Road and Lok Virsa Vicinity

Field observations confirm large-scale clearing of targeted trees along the Shakarparian link road and opposite Lok Virsa. Fresh plantation of young saplings was observed at some locations, indicating initiation of restoration efforts. However, extensive exposed soil suggests that rehabilitation is still incomplete.

5.2 Opposite National Museum, Shakarparian

Clearing of understory vegetation and shrubs was observed near the National Museum area. Signs of soil compaction due to heavy machinery were evident, which may affect natural regeneration if not addressed through soil restoration measures.

5.3 Forested Patches with Selective Clearing

In some pine-dominated forest patches, selective clearing was noted. While the intention appears to be removal of undesirable or invasive vegetation, care is needed to ensure that indigenous species and natural regeneration processes are not adversely affected.

5.4 H-8 Islamabad Expressway (Proposed Monument Site)

At the H-8 Islamabad Expressway site, large-scale land leveling and excavation were observed, with on-site information indicating that the area is planned for construction of a monument. Time-series Google Earth imagery shows a progressive expansion of land clearing from approximately 1.5 ha in 2023 to about 6.5 ha by 2025; after excluding

previously disturbed land, the net vegetation and tree cover loss is estimated at approximately 5 hectares. No active plantation or interim landscaping measures were visible at the time of visit, indicating that the clearing is infrastructure-driven and raising concerns regarding the temporary loss of green cover and the absence of clarity on post-construction ecological design. Images and pictures are given under.

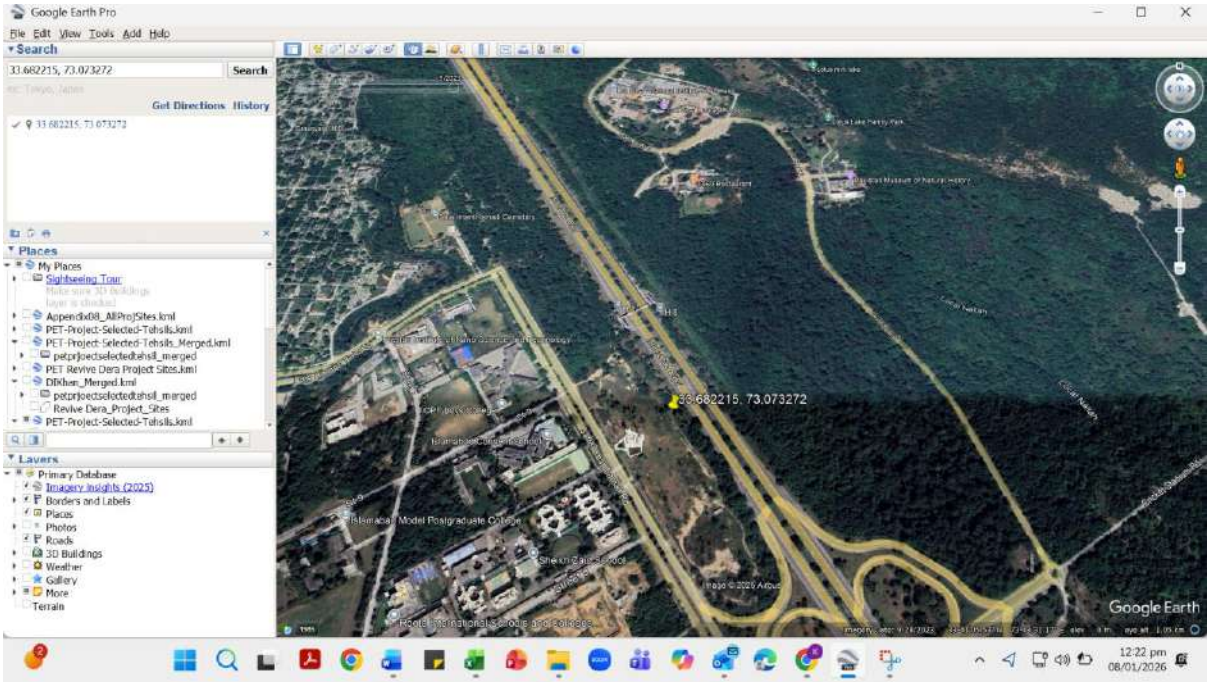

Image date 9/2023 (Flag area and Park was approximately 1.5 ha)

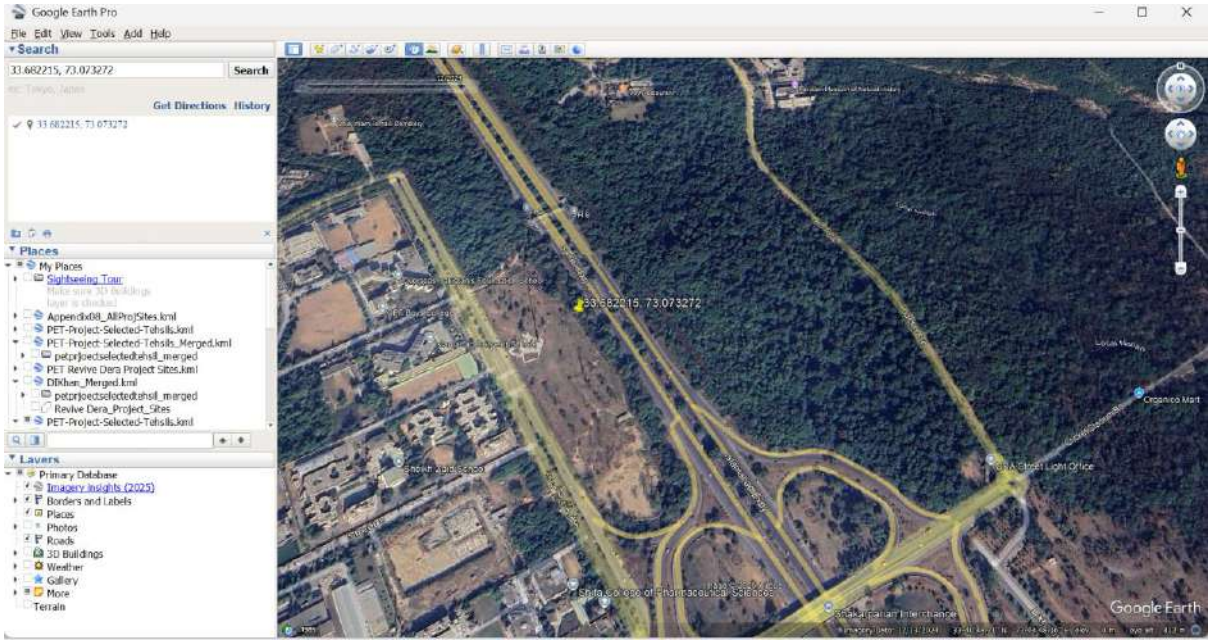

Image date 12/2024 (extended to about 3.5 ha)

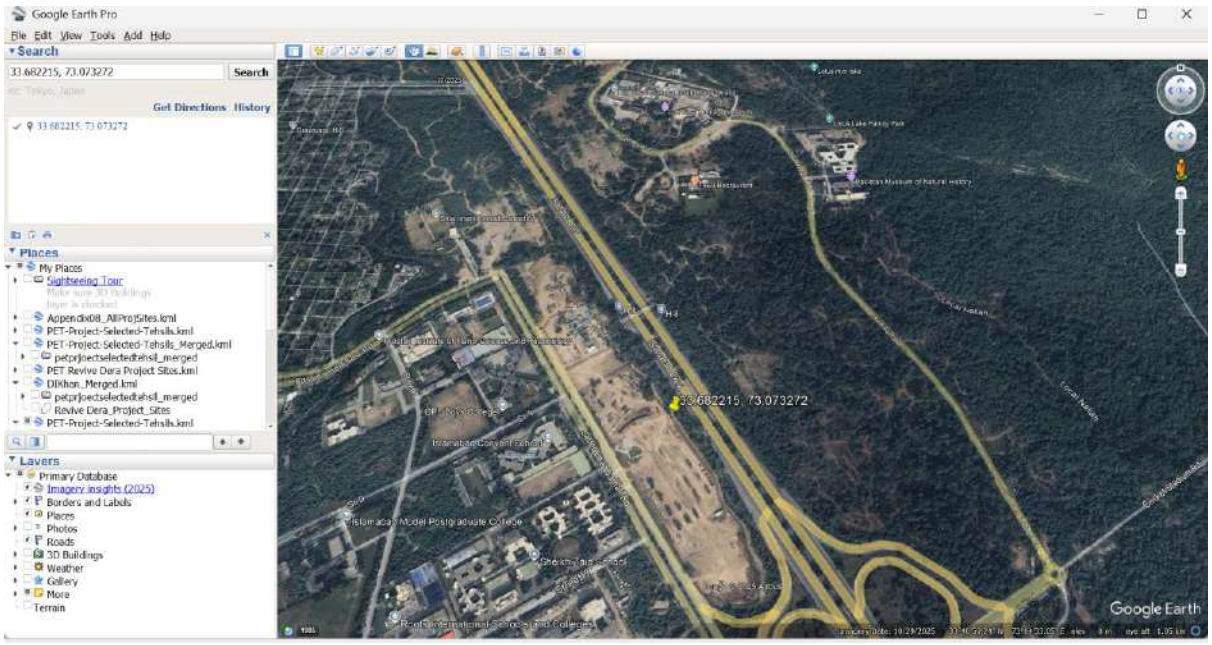

Image date 10/2025 (extended to about 6.5 ha)

5.3 Margalla Enclave Link Road (Opposite CDA Garden, near NIH)

WWF-Pakistan's field team visited the Margalla Enclave Link Road site (GPS: 33.683050, 73.139622), where CDA is constructing a 12-lane road approximately 4 km in length. Over the last two to three months, approximately 1–1.5 km of the corridor, with an average width

of about 100 meters, has been cleared, corresponding to an estimated 10–15 hectares of vegetation loss.

Tree species removed include Paper Mulberry (Broussonetia papyrifera), Shisham (Dalbergia sissoo), Kachnar (Bauhinia variegata), and Simal (Bombax ceiba). While Paper Mulberry is allergenic, it is also adapted to local conditions and provides food and shelter for birds. Observations confirm that clearing at this site is driven by road construction rather than targeted Paper Mulberry eradication.

Photographic evidence from the Margalla Enclave Link Road site is provided below:

6. Replacement and Replantation Measures

According to CDA officials, a compensatory plantation ratio of 3:1 is being applied for Paper Mulberry removal, with indigenous and low-allergen species being planted during winter and spring plantation campaigns. Field evidence indicates that replantation has commenced at several cleared sites, particularly in Shakarparian. Nonetheless, consistency, survival rates, and species composition will require systematic monitoring. Also, no revegetation plans of the sites cleared for infrastructure development could not be ascertained both in the field as well as during the discussions with contractors.

7. Public Perception and Emerging Concerns

Interviews with local residents reflect broad support for reducing allergenic pollen sources in the city. At the same time, concerns persist regarding the scale of tree removal, temporary loss of shade and ecosystem services, and doubts over whether all removed trees were indeed Paper Mulberry. These perceptions highlight the need for greater transparency and public communication.

8. Key Issues Identified

- Temporary but significant short-term loss of urban tree and vegetation cover at multiple sites, particularly along major corridors and infrastructure development areas.
- Soil exposure, compaction, and heightened erosion risks resulting from large-scale clearing and mechanical leveling.
- Limited transparency and on-site information explaining the purpose, scope, and extent of tree removal and land clearing activities, especially at infrastructure sites.
- Lack of clarity on landscaping, compensatory plantation, and ecological restoration plans, with a notable absence of visible ecological design at the proposed monument site.

9. Conclusions

Overall, field evidence and available documentation indicate that while a significant portion of tree removal across Islamabad is associated with the Paper Mulberry eradication programme driven by public-health considerations, substantial vegetation loss has also resulted from infrastructure development, particularly along the H-8 Islamabad Expressway (proposed monument site) and the Margalla Enclave Link Road. At the H-8 site alone, infrastructure-related land clearing has resulted in an estimated net loss of approximately 5 hectares of urban tree and vegetation cover. Although reforestation and compensatory plantation efforts are reportedly underway at several locations, their visibility, consistency, and ecological design, especially at infrastructure sites, remain unclear. The long-term ecological success of these interventions will therefore depend on transparent decision-making, clear and site-specific restoration planning, prioritization of native species, and independent monitoring to ensure that Islamabad's green character and ecological integrity are effectively safeguarded.

10. Recommendations

To safeguard Islamabad's ecological integrity, natural beauty, and ecosystem services—while accommodating necessary urban and infrastructure development, WWF-Pakistan recommends the following integrated measures:

- Ensure transparency in tree removal and replantation by publicly disclosing site-specific plans, species affected, and timelines, supported by independent verification and clear on-site information.

- Minimize vegetation loss by adopting avoidance of large-scale clearing as a first principle, requiring pre-construction tree mapping, and prioritizing the retention of mature native trees.
- Mandate ecological planning for infrastructure projects, including approved landscaping and restoration plans prior to clearing, with immediate interim measures to control erosion, dust, and visual degradation.
- Avoid exotic and alien species, including date palm, in all public plantations; develop and enforce a prohibited species list to prevent ecological mismatch and biodiversity risks.
- Promote native and mixed-species plantations adapted to the Potohar Plateau ecology to enhance biodiversity, reduce water demand, and strengthen climate resilience.
- Mandate EIAs and approved ecological restoration plans prior to infrastructure clearing.
- Prioritize native, biodiversity-friendly species and prohibit ecologically unsuitable exotics.
- Institutionalize monitoring and public engagement to track plantation survival and ecological outcomes, supported by independent assessments and public reporting.

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