



100 years to grow a forest, 25 to strip it bare

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Environmental activists in Madurai say the Vellimalai sacred grove is the only one in the district which has a large number of kadambam and usilai trees

Just 20km away from the bustling city of Madurai lies Vellimalai sacred grove, a sanctuary of biodiversity that once spanned 460 acres, and teeming with native trees, medicinal herbs and several species of endemic birds. Sadly, over the years, the grove has been besieged by encroachments and development that are threatening its ecosystem.

Over the past 25 years, government agencies including the Indo Tibetan Border Police (ITBP), Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF), Tamil Nadu Police Recruitment Board (TNRB), and Tamil Nadu Fire and Rescue Service (TNFRS), have steadily encroached on the heritage site, whittling the 460 acres of forest to a mere 110.

The ITBP has taken over 50 acres to develop a camp near Vellimalai, the CRPF another 50, the TNPRB around 75, and the TNFRS around 10. And now, the state government announced plans to construct a building for the Madurai central prison here in a land area of 85 acres, marked as 'barren' by the revenue department.

Environmental activists in Madurai say the Vellimalai sacred grove is the only one in the district which has a large number of kadambam and usilai trees, both of which are considered medicinal plants in Ayurveda. Villagers are against the move as they say the area should be declared a forest and a biodiversity heritage site like Arittapatti in Madurai.

The grove is surrounded by villages including Idayapatti, Therkamur, Mukkampatti, Thirukanai, Vellakuppan and Meenakshipuram. “The Vellimalai forest boasts of more than 187 species of trees, 98 species of birds, 43 species of butterfly and 12 types of mammals, several of which are endemic, endangered, or threatened,” says Tamil Dasan, coordinator of the Madurai Nature and Cultural Forum, an NGO working on cataloguing the biodiversity in the Idayapatti forest. “For generations, villagers have worshipped the usilai and kadambam trees. These groves are preserved by the local communities as they are considered the abode of ancestral spirits and gods.” He adds that sacred groves are tracts of forest which are around places of worship.



Vellimalai has four temples within a 5km radius, the most famous being the 11th century Idayapatti Murugan temple at its centre.

Dr T Badrinarayanan, an ophthalmologist by profession and an ornithologist by passion, says birdwatching groups have been observing the shrinking biodiversity of the area. “From 2005, the area

has been getting urbanised. Officials say the forest will not be affected as they are going to construct the prison building on the piece of land opposite the kadambam forest. But the forest is inhabited by several species of birds. The development in the area may affect the ecosystem," he says.

Environmental activist Parkavithai Karthikeyan, who has written a book on kadamba trees, says one of the reasons that Vellimalai is unique is because nowhere else in Tamil Nadu will you see 400 of these trees together in one area. "This tropical thorn forest is a unique ecosystem." Karthikeyan says that the Ven Kadambu (*Neolamarckia cadamba*) grows in north India, whereas in Madurai Neer Kadambu (*Mitragyna pavifolia*) is the native species. "In TN, this is one of the only places where Neer Kadambu grows naturally. In other areas, saplings are planted during environmental drives, but with disappointing results. That's why it is important Vellimalai be declared a biodiversity heritage site."

On May 22, International Biodiversity Day, state forest minister M Mathiventhan promised villagers he would appeal to Tamil Nadu chief minister M K Stalin for an alternative location for the new prison building. Now, a group of villagers from Idayapatti are rallying against the upcoming project. "We have submitted a proposal to the government to consider the sacred grove a biodiversity heritage site," says V Karthick, who sensitises villagers about the sacred grove.

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