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A first: Replacing acacia with native species

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KOCHI: On February 16, 2020, three forest watchers were burn to death in a raging fire at an acacia plantation leased out to Hindustan Newsprint Ltd (HNL) in Wadakkanchery range in Thrissur.

Two years later, saplings of indigenous species, including mango, jackfruit, guava, jamun, gooseberry, Gmelina Arborea, bamboo, Terminalia Bellirica and Wrightia Tinctoria, have slowly started replacing non-native and invasive acacia trees on the 475 hectares (ha) of land where, for foresters, memories of the tragic day still linger, reports TC Sreemol.

Triggered by the death of forest watchers, forest department took back the land from HNL and started eco-restoration works last year by uprooting acacia trees, which negatively impact ecosystem, and planting native species.

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300 indigenous mango varieties were planted

Funded by NABARD, this eco-restoration activity is the first in the state and the work is on in full swing on the land under the Poongode forest station limit.

“The forest fire was a result of poor maintenance of the plantation. Overgrown grass that had dried up in summer had triggered the blaze, said Poongode forest station deputy range officer Manoj Damodaran K.

“It was a narrow escape for us. Unfortunately, our three colleagues got trapped in the fire gulping down dry grass over 10ft tall. Now, we are raising the saplings of fruit-bearing and other indigenous species on the same land,” said beat forest officer Sudheer K S and forest watcher P Mohanan, pointing to the lush green saplings growing on the rocky patches and slope of Chembikunnu. The saplings include 300 indigenous mango varieties. The eco-restoration began in June last year after uprooting acacia trees on 80ha and gap filling (planting local saplings in between the existing indigenous species) on another 50ha.

Instead of burning wood, logs were left to decay. “Burning wood means microorganisms would also perish, which we didn’t want. We planted over 1 lakh saplings last year and 80–90% of them survived. The purpose of restoration is to prevent degradation of the land and facilitate a natural ecosystem to bring back birds, butterflies and other species which were prevalent in the area before the acacia plantation came up around 20 years ago. Once the birds return, the natural ecosystem will flourish,” said the deputy range officer.

This year, another 2.5 lakh saplings, raised in the nearby nursery of the department, will be planted on 171.5ha. The species to be planted have been identified with the help of knowledge imparted by lo- cal people and scientists at Kerala Forest Research Institute (KFRI).

“It is a long-term process. Even after uprooting the acacia trees, saplings from seeds dropped for years continue to grow here. We have roped in local people through Vana SamrakshanaSamithi to uproot the acacia saplings. It will take another eight to 10 years to completely remove acacia plants from the area. There are acacia trees on another 180ha. They will be felled next year. After that saplings of indigenous species will be planted there too,” said Manoj.

“Ecological restoration in Poongod is a pilot project of the forest department. KFRI will take readings of various factors such as how the restoration activities enrich flora and fauna, soil nutrients and other factors periodically over the next few years,” said Dr S Sandeep, senior scientist in the department of soil science, KFRI.