

THE HINDU

Forest Department expands probe into illegal felling

21 June 2021

The Forest Department has expanded its investigation into the illegal felling of valuable trees from Revenue land in Kerala.

It has seized more than 1,000 cubic meter of expensive wood felled between October last and April 2021 under cover of a Revenue Department order permitting farmers to harvest hard-wood trees they had cultivated on their assigned land. At least 40% of confiscated timber was rosewood and the remaining teak.

A senior official said the detections were just the tip of the iceberg. An army of agents, mill owners, timber depot managers and exporters had scoured revenue land abutting forests searching for expensive and rare trees on plots allocated to farmers for cultivation since 1954.

The agents identified the trees for felling, approached the farmers, and showed the controversial Revenue Department order. It provided them with legal cover.

They offered the farmers a pittance for the rosewood or teak on their plot. The middle-men then used the farmer's name and signature to apply for a 'cutting permit' to fell the tree.

The Forest Department was the issuing authority. However, it had no jurisdiction on revenue land. It regularly sends the logging application to the Revenue Department for approval.

An official said Revenue Department officials, mostly Tahalsidars, recommended the felling of the tree on a cue. They rarely verified the land records or examined the tree register. The Forest Department had no choice but to grant permission and issue a pass for transporting the timber. Several District Collectors had raised a red flag. They sent cautionary reports to the government stating that a criminal mafia with political influence had misused the order to denude Kerala of its tree wealth. However, the warning seemed to have served little purpose.

Head of Forest Force, P. K. Kesavan, is spearheading the investigation. He has asked the Conservator of Forests, Inspection and Evaluation, to look into illegal tree felling from Kasaragod to Ernakulam. His counterpart in Kozhikode would look into the theft of valuable timber from South Kerala.

The Forest Department has registered scores of cases. It suspected that a part of the loot was smuggled abroad or turned into furniture or house fittings. DFO, Flying Squad, Kozhikode, P. Dhanesh Kumar and DFO, Flying Squad, Idukki are assisting Mr. Kesavan. Forest Minister A. K. Saseendran is scheduled to review the case on Tuesday.

Source: <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/kerala/forest-department-expands-probe-into-illegal-felling/article34893952.ece>