Public trained to identify invasive flora

To map spread of exotic species

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The public, trained in identifying invasive species of flora, may prove to be an extremely useful part of ascertaining the extent of invasive flora in the Nilgiris.

Recently, the Ashoka Trust for Research on Ecology and Environment (ATREE), Bengaluru, along with Keystone Foundation in Kotagiri, organised a training programme for residents from local communities to identify around 27 species of invasive flora in different parts of the Nilgiris.

Shiny Mariam Rehel, programme coordinator for the Biodiversity Restoration Programme at Keystone Foundation, said the residents would collect data on the type of invasive species present in a given location as well as the extent of the species in any given area and other parameters.

"For instance, if we take the Sigur plateau, there are invasive species like parthenium, Lantana camara and Eupatorium species that have incredibly harmful effect on local biodiversity. Near water bodies, there are species of Eichhornia that are harmful. Through this training, we are trying to help people identify these plants, the locations, altitudes and extent of their spread in the Nilgiris," said Ms. Rehel.

The exotic species-filled forest in Gudalur.
▪ M. SATHYAMOORTHY

The data from this exercise will be recorded through an open data kit - 'Mapping of invasive alien species,' that can be downloaded and used through mobile phones.

It is hoped that the exercise could lead to a thematic map that can inform policy makers and help effectively remove invasive species from any particular landscape or environment. Continual data collection each year could also help track the spread or contraction of a particular species in different areas, researchers said.

The Keystone Foundation said they hoped that they would also be able to include forest department staff, officials and policy makers in future training programmes. The initiative is being supported by funding from the National Geographic Society Grant.