

The weed that fueled the Bandipur fire may be tough to eradicate, say experts

Lantana, a weed that was brought to India about 250 years ago, now has widespread growth in the Bandipur Tiger Reserve.

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- Friday, March 01, 2019 - 17:44



It took five days of tireless efforts by nearly 400 forest officials, firefighters, volunteers and close to 49,000 litres of water bombing by two IAF helicopters to douse the fire in Bandipur Tiger Reserve. While the Forest Department deemed the fire an act of sabotage, the abundance of a foreign weed proved to be a catalyst in addition to other natural factors.

Lantana camara, commonly referred to as lantana, is a weed native to South America and is being touted as the primary cause for the quick spread of the fire. The plant, which was alien to the land probably 300 years ago, now has widespread growth in the forest according to ecology experts.

Nakul M Dev, a volunteer who worked for two days to douse the flames in GS Betta range said, "If it wasn't for lantana, the fire would have been 50%-60% less intense. It acts as fuel to fire. About 80% of the entire forest floor has been taken over by it."

Another naturalist, Rahul Aradhya, who was part of the firefighting efforts, said, "Since it has creepers which can grow over trees, the fire affected bigger trees, which are otherwise unaffected during small forest fires."

Siddappa Setty R, Fellow, Programme Leader at the Centre for Environment and Development at ATREE and expert on community and biodiversity conservation, explains that lantana came to India as a decorative plant about 250 years ago. "Since then, it has had a highly negative impact on biodiversity. Even the grass cover in the forest has fallen significantly because of it," he told TNM.

While experts agree on how harmful lantana is, there does not seem to be a consensus on how to eradicate it.

How lantana can be dealt with

IISc professor TV Ramachandra says that the larger issue is deforestation and the reckless import of plants from other countries. Foreign species like lantana, parthena or eupatorium do not allow regeneration of native species as they grow even in non-fertile and open areas, he adds. The "obnoxious weed", as Siddappa calls it, spreads quickly due to its fast growth and ready pollination in dry deciduous forests.

Lakshminarayana, a retired IFS officer from Karnataka, said, "Phased timely action can see some success against lantana. Just before the monsoon, if we can remove lantana from the roots, and plant native species in its place, maybe we can eradicate it completely."

However, a senior official within the Forest Department told TNM, "We cannot simply uproot lantana, this will create more proliferation of parthena or eupatorium (other invasive weeds) without proper followups. Further, some animals have adapted to these weeds now and a few, like deer and black-faced langurs, have even started feeding on them," he said.

Nakul and Rahul advocate dedicated de-weeding to deal with it. While the process is resource intensive, they say that the weed can be commercially used. It can be used in making furniture or

as bio-fuel, which is being done in Australia, Rahul says. “However, But we cannot use machinery to remove it as a lot of native species will be lost in the process,” he added.

Activists say that some experiments are already being conducted to turn lantana into plywood and paper among other things.

As recently as in 2017, at the Biligiri Rangaswamy Temple (BRT) Wildlife Sanctuary, the Soligas, the local tribal population were employed to make carvings and products like baskets out of lantana plants under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act scheme.

“They tried very different methods of clipping, cropping, uprooting and mechanised methods as well but nothing worked. Lantana grew back. Even in Nagarhole in certain patches they are trying to do other experiments but with little success,” said Joseph Hoover, a conservationist.

“More recently around six months ago, the forest department has brought a species of beetle from Mexico which feeds selectively on these weeds and it was working well both in Nagarhole and Bandipur. They are studying it in a measured way and figuring out if there are any side-effects,” he added.