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Kerala turns environmental threat to economic opportunity with Senna Spectabilis removal

This aggressive plant, which endangers the local ecosystem, will be harvested and transformed into paper pulp by KPPL, a state-run paper mill.



Dileep V Kumar

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Senna Spectabilis (iStock)

Drawing inspiration from the Tamil Nadu Forest Department, Kerala Forests Department has launched an initiative to eradicate the invasive Senna Spectabilis from Wayanad Wildlife Sanctuary.

collaboration with Tamil Nadu Newsprint and Papers Limited (TNPL) turned invasive plants into paper—Kerala aims to protect its biodiversity while generating economic benefits.

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Threat to biodiversity

Senna Spectabilis, introduced in the 1970s as part of a social forestry initiative, has since taken over more than 35% of the Wayanad Wildlife Sanctuary.

This invasive species spread across 34,440 hectares of the sanctuary, is said to be spreading rapidly at a rate of 55.26%, disrupting native flora and fauna, and posing a severe threat to biodiversity.

The decision to cut down the invasive species came after considering a Forest Department report that the presence of Senna spectabilis in the sanctuary, which is part of the Nilgiri Biosphere, will severely disrupt the ecological balance.

Nilgiri Biosphere is the first biosphere recognized by UNESCO in 1986 under the Man and Biosphere programme.

Earlier, a similar warning was sounded by the Wildlife Conservation Society-India (WCS) an NGO, and the Kerala Forest Research Institute (KFRI) that the plant's presence results in areas devoid of other plants and wildlife, escalating human-wildlife conflicts.

It is learnt that the initiative to repurpose Senna Spectabilis for paper production aligns with the Industries Department's directive to explore all avenues to boost newsprint production in response to growing market demand.

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KPPL's sustainable approach

KPPL, taken over by the state government after the central government abandoned it, will initially collect 5,000 metric tonnes of Senna Spectabilis trees from the sanctuary.

The revenue from this operation will fund forest rebuilding efforts.

The Forest Department and KPPL have a long-term agreement to utilize forest-based raw materials for paper making ensuring sustainable production.

It is said that though the pulp density of Senna spectabilis is lower than commonly used pulpwood like eucalyptus and casuarina, it could still be used alongside other materials for paper making.

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Other initiatives

The department is currently employing debarking and uprooting as a method to control the plant, as existing norms prohibit cutting trees in protected areas.

Meanwhile, the Tamil Nadu Forest Department has successfully implemented the strategy of cutting down in Mudumalai and Satyamangalam Tiger Reserves, securing a favorable court verdict and partnering with TNPL for paper production.

Though the department joined hands with Prithvi Root, a nature club, and launched Mission Manja Konna in March second week, the former didn't consider this as a long-term solution.

Uprooting, which was also considered, turned out to be labour-intensive and involved larger financial liability.

In its 2019 report, the WCS observed that Senna Spectabilis is very hardy and survives under challenging conditions and that eradicating the species from a landscape can take years.

Some 3-5 saplings were planted around the Muthanga Range Office, from where they started to spread into the forest.

(Edited by Shauqueen Mizaj)

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