



## **Concerns emerge over plan to plant 2,400 Banyan trees amid Banni grassland restoration**

05 August 2023

Amid the ongoing project of restoring Banni grassland in the Kutch district of Gujarat by removing encroachments and the invasive gando baval (*prosopis juliflora*), the state's Forest Department has launched a drive to plant 2,400 banyan trees. The grassland is considered among the finest and the largest in Asia.

The decision, however, has raised some concerns as the banyan tree, often referred a micro forest, could change the ecosystem of the grassland that once was also home to cheetahs. The grassland is also claimed to account for 45 per cent of the country's pastures and was cited by Prime Minister Narendra Modi — in his keynote address to the United Nations' "High-Level Dialogue on Desertification, Land Degradation and Drought" in 2021 — as an example of restoration of land.

"We have instructions from top officers to plant some banyan trees in Banni for the benefit of birds. We have been given a target of planting 2,400 banyan trees," Bharat Patel, Deputy Conservator of Forests (DCF) of Banni, told [The Indian Express](#)

Incidentally, the Forest Department had started the work of restoring Banni grassland by removing gando baval and creating grass plots. The grass plots are being created by digging trenches around to prevent unregulated grazing and then spreading seeds of local varieties of grass if needed after furrowing the land. In three years, the Forest Department has restored around 10,000 hectares (ha) against the target of restoring a total of 75,000 ha (100 hectares make one square km).

Though Banni grassland is spread over 2.5 lakh ha, some parts are very saline where trees like banyan can't grow. "Presently, we are planting banyan saplings on dykes around grass plots and in the middle of some the large grass plots," the DCF said, adding, "We are also sowing seeds of native species like babul (*Acacia Nilotica*) on the dykes."

Besides having 40 species of grass and 99 species of flowering plants, Banni is also home to the Indian wolf, jackal, Indian fox, desert fox, desert cat, caracal, hyena, chinkara, Nilgai, wild boar, Indian hare, common monitor lizard — and the cheetah before it became extinct. Banni also has 273 bird species and in years of good rainfall, it is home to thousands of migratory birds.

Besides babul, which is locally called deshi baval, other native tree and shrub species of Banni include khijdo (*prosopis cineraria*), khari jaar (*salvadora persica*) and meethi jaar (*salvadora*

oleoides), kerad (capparis decidua) and bor and bordi (ziziphus species. Jaar is also known as pilu or toothbrush tree and along with deshi baval area, is also used as fodder.

Patel said the Forest Department has already raised some banyan trees in Hodko and Dhordo villages in the Banni grassland. "We have grown banyan trees near our grass godowns and have concluded that banyan trees can grow in Banni."

The DCF said that banyan saplings are being sourced from nurseries of the state's Forest Department. "This is a non-planned activity for which no special budget has been prepared," he said.

Banni is dotted by 52 villages of maldharis or cattle-herders. The Banni breed of buffalo, which borrows its name from the grassland, is considered a coveted breed in Gujarat. However, Pankaj Joshi, from NGO Sahjeevan, an ecologist who studied the ecology of Banni grassland, termed the idea of planting banyan trees in Banni a "wacky idea". "Trees of 12 to 15 native species grow in Banni. Save near villages or low-lying areas where there is fresh water available, banyan trees will not be able to grow. While these trees can provide shade to birds, mammals, and rodents, planting them instead of local species of trees in Banni is a wacky idea," said Joshi.

Joshi said that growing banyan trees in an area where even babul finds it difficult to grow will prove a daunting task though he added that a banyan tree in itself can constitute an entire ecosystem. "However, one has to bear in mind that Kutch is a drought-prone area where even people have to struggle for potable water sometimes. In such an area, if we plant trees which are not drought and salinity resistant, they will require a lot of watering and this has also to be factored in," Joshi, a taxonomist, added.

Some forest officers pointed out that local wildlife does not require banyan trees and said that these trees can affect the productivity of this grassland. "It is true that banyan trees are rightly called 'inn for birds'. But bird species found in Banni are mainly grassland birds which nest mainly on the ground. Therefore, the suitability of having banyan trees in Banni is a debatable issue," said the officer, requesting anonymity. However, scientists of Gujarat Institute of Desert Ecology (GUIDE), a research institute in Bhuj, Kutch, functioning under the aegis of the Gujarat Forest Department, opine that 2,400 banyan trees are unlikely to cause any adverse impact on Banni's ecological character.

"In the best-case scenario, where all 2,400 saplings grow into large trees, the maximum land that they will occupy cumulatively will be around 100 ha to 150 ha, assuming a single banyan tree will occupy half an acre of land. That is minuscule for an area as large as Banni," V Vijay Kumar, Director, GUIDE said. "Banyan is a slow-growing species which lives for hundreds of years. These trees will produce more oxygen and provide food and roosting and nesting places to birds," he added.

The GUIDE director, however, said that these plants will require care. "Around 90 per cent of Banni's area is saline. Half of Banni's area or around 1.20 lakh ha is highly saline while another 30 to 40 per cent or about 70,000 ha is moderately saline. Banyan trees can grow in areas having moderate or low salinity. In fact, there used to be mango trees in Banni villages like

Misariyado, Daddhar among others till around 40 years ago. But they disappeared as salinity, which fluctuates with the amount of rainfall, increased over the years.”

Meanwhile, the DCF said that the Forest Department harvested eight lakh kg of grass from grass plots created on 2,400 hectares in 2022-23 and allowed local organisations of maldharis to harvest the remaining 20 lakh kg. “Not only that, in the aftermath of the cyclone Biparjoy, we distributed a total of five lakh kg of grass among Banni maldharis at the rate of four kg of grass per cattle head per day with a ceiling of a maximum of five cattle heads per grass coupon. The distribution went on for five days. It was thus for the first time that Banni maldharis got grass harvested from Banni itself since the restoration project began,” said Patel.

The DCF said that for the year 2023-24, the Gujarat government has tasked the Forest Department to cultivate grass on 1,300 hectares of Banni and the grass cultivation target is likely to be set in November. “However, the grassland is already lush green thanks to rains brought by Biparjoy and subsequent monsoon rains in July,” said Patel.

Source: <https://indianexpress.com/article/cities/ahmedabad/gujarat-banyan-trees-plantation-banni-grassland-restoration-gujarat-encroachments-gujarat-forest-department-8877259/>