

Rare forest ecosystem faces steady degradation in Kollam

Though the swamps, endemic to many species, are critically in need of conservation, currently there is no consistent monitoring system in place to detect changes

November 18, 2023 08:57 pm | Updated 08:57 pm IST - KOLLAM

NAVAMY SUDHISH

COMMENTS

SHARE

 READ LATER



The Myristica swamps, which is facing slow and steady degradation, at Sasthanada, Kulathupuzha in Kollam. | Photo Credit: HANDOUT

A few years back when a small mud road divided the Sankhili forest, there used to be patches of dense breathing roots on both sides. Today, this intricate network emerging out of tree trunks and ground can hardly cover the forest floor under a shrunken canopy. Myristica swamps, a rare and archaic forest ecosystem largely confined to Kulathupuzha and Anchal forest ranges in Kollam, is facing slow and steady degradation due to multiple factors including man-myristica conflict. According to tribespeople, while virgin fragments inside the forest remain intact, those on the fringes have changed over the years. “When we go inside the forest you see swamps crammed with trees and saplings, but here you can see gaps that are getting wider. Some pieces have dried up and human entry to collect Minor Forest Produce (MFP) can be a reason,” says Sasikumar, who is also the president of Vana Samrakshana Samithi (VSS).

Myristica swamps are called live fossils, a biodiversity hotspot dominated by evergreen trees belonging to Myristicaceae family, one of the oldest flowering plants on earth. Researchers had earlier mapped around 60 small and large Myristica swamps with central streams in Anchal and Kulathupuzha Forest ranges and Shendurney Wildlife Sanctuary. Since they are habitats with a relic status dating back to primordial times, the swamps have great conservation value. “Degradation of the myristica habitats is a reality as anthropogenic disturbances are increasing in some parts. The biggest swamp in Sasthanada, with an area covering over five hectares, would have been a continuous expanse if we hadn’t constructed a motorable road in the middle. After the single segment of swamp was torn into two pieces, one part started drying up. Though there has been no recent studies, we have noticed the change in species composition during field visits. In some other areas the construction of check dams for cultivation and watering holes for animals have also impacted this unique ecosystem,” says a senior Forests official.

Though the swamps are critically in need of conservation, currently there is no consistent monitoring system in place to detect changes. Since the ecosystem is endemic to many species, protecting the habitat is very crucial for their regeneration. Experts recommend different strategies that include minimising anthropogenic disturbance, regulating visitors, preventing the invasion of non-swampy species and maintaining the hydrological balance of the habitat. “The swamps are naturally patchy habitats with a

high number of endemic species. The local tribes may collect minor forest produce but their activity is very minimal. The swamps are partially inundated for several months a year. There is a need to regulate water harvesting from hill streams to sustain the swamps. With proper conservation measures they can be protected,” says Hema Somanathan, Professor and Head, School of Biology, Indian Institute of Science Education and Research, Thiruvananthapuram.

COMMENTS

SHARE
