

Shola forests in Western Ghats stage fight back

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Regenerating native species need to be protected: conservationists Native flora endemic to the Western Ghats are staging a remarkable comeback among the exotic tree plantations of Snowdon near Doddabetta Peak in Udhagamandalam, with a variety of trees which constitute typical Shola forests seen re-establishing themselves in large numbers in the area. The area, which had, in the past, been planted with exotic flora such as pine, eucalyptus, wattle and even cinchona, has witnessed a steady resurgence of native flora over the last decade, with native trees, including *Rhododendran arboreum*, *Syzygium calophyllifolium*, *Litsea wightiana* and *Daphniphyllum neilgherrense*, re-establishing and in some cases, even managing to displace the exotic flora from small patches in the area. According to restoration ecologist and member of the High Court appointed expert panel on invasive species management, Godwin Vasanth Bosco, not just Shola trees, but also shrubs and trees that typically form the boundary of a Shola-grassland mosaic, such as the *Helichrysum buddleioides*, and the *Rhodomyrtus tomentosa*, have managed to gain ground in the highly-altered landscape in Snowdon, which is just one of many areas across the Nilgiris and the Western Ghats in general where native plants and trees are regenerating.

Multiple factors

“A combination of factors, including the age of the plantation stands, the fact that the forest department has not removed exotics on a large scale, and the availability of seed banks of Shola trees from the surrounding, existing forests has helped the landscape to begin accommodating native species again,” said Mr. Bosco. Forest department officials said that Snow don was just one of the many patches of forest where native Shola species were managing to push back against invasive species of flora. “There are some areas where the rejuvenation of native trees is more pronounced than in others. We don’t really know the exact causes of such rejuvenation occurring, but suspect that native forests can grow more easily among invasive flora, when the invasive trees have completed their initial stage of growth, where they very intensively compete with native plants, trees and shrubs for resources. After this initial growing phase, it could be that invasive trees compete in a much lesser capacity with the native flora for resources, which in turn allows the native species to return and re-establish,” said a top forest department official.

Fragile forests

Like many forests where rejuvenation of Shola species is being witnessed, the returning native forests in Snow don are also extremely fragile and are susceptible to once again being overtaken by exotic weeds unless they remain protected. With a road passing through the forest, and pressure being applied on the forest department to make it accessible for vehicles during the busy tourist season, there is an urgent need for it to be protected, conservationists warn. “This forest is an example that if the remaining patches of Shola forest and grasslands are kept healthy, there is a chance for native species to re-establish themselves even in highly disturbed habitats. Such forests need to be monitored, while targeted, minimal interventions could be made to facilitate the rejuvenation of the trees. However, it is also extremely important that the road passing through the forest is not opened for traffic,” added Mr. Bosco

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