

## Eco panels in the Nilgiris restore native habitats

15 July 2020

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While most eco-development committees (EDCs) tasked with providing environmentally sustainable livelihoods to tribal residents in the Nilgiris have been shut due to the closure of the district to tourists, the Pagalkodu Mund EDC, near Udhagamandalam, is restoring native Shola habitats in places over-run by invasive species.

Northey Kuttan, president of the Pagalkodu Mund EDC, said that during the pandemic, 18 persons employed with the EDC were being engaged in getting rid of *Cestrum nocturnum* plants, which had encroached on native Shola habitats in the Wenlock Downs area.

"The spread of *Cestrum nocturnum* is a threat to all Shola and grassland habitats, as it does not allow any native flora to thrive, Mr. Kuttan told *The Hindu*.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, the Todas, who are in charge of taking care of the Pagalkodu Mund EDC, encompassing the Ninth Mile Shooting Spot, have re-



**Green fingers:** The Todas have set up a nursery which will have more than 7,000 saplings. ■ M. SATHYAMOORTHY

moved more than two hectares of *Cestrum* plants.

"The *Cestrum* plants, unless completely removed along with their roots, will keep sprouting and taking over Shola and native grasslands," said Mr. Kuttan.

The Todas are growing their own saplings and have set up a nursery, which will have more than 7,000 saplings of native Shola trees, ready to be planted in the coming years.

"We estimate that it will take around 4-5 years to clear all the invasive plants located from Sandynallah to

Pykara and reintroduce native flora," added Mr. Kuttan.

The Forest Department has been encouraging local EDCs to carry out afforestation of native flora at a time when tourism is banned in the Nilgiris.

District Forest Officer D. Guruswamy said afforestation works were a vital facet of each EDC. "Apart from the commendable work of the Pagalkodu Mund EDC, other EDCs, such as the Doddabetta EDC and the Pykara EDC, are involved in huge clean-up operations and habitat-restoration works," he said.