

Forest dept to mark trees afresh in Anakkayam

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Kochi: The forest department has started a fresh process of marking the trees, which include several threatened, vulnerable and critically-endangered species, at the site of the proposed Anakkayam small hydro electric project (SHEP), as the identification numbers painted seven years ago are no more recognizable.

The forest department had marked 1,897 trees in eight hectares identified for the 7.5MW Sholayar tail-race project in 2013 and the Kerala State Electricity Board Ltd (KSEBL) which was the project proponent had paid net present value and seigniorage based on the volume of trees.

“The markings are all covered by fresh bark. We have started the process of re-marking the trees and since there are many varieties of trees, giving them a new number is not practical. They need to find the same tree with the old number. This is a time consuming process,” said a senior forest official. The department also needs to reassess the value of the trees based on the girth and the species.

The trees are spread across Vazhachal and Sholayar and had a total seigniorage value of Rs 91.7 lakh as per 2013 estimates. While there were 1,438 trees in the Sholayar division totalling 331.6m³, Vazhachal had 459 trees with a quantum of 140.4m³. The price of the trees with girth ranging from 70cm to 740cm were fixed based on their quality.

According to environmental activists, the felling of trees from the forest stretch would lead to fragmentation and severely impact wildlife, as steep scarps of rocks on the southern ridge, plantations in the east and submergence of forest land caused by Sholayar reservoir have already impacted their movement. There are several trees on the site which are in the IUCN Red List, but not enough thought has been spared about the felling of trees by the National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA) which gave the final approval in 2018. The area had become part of Parambikulam Tiger Reserve in 2009, before KSEBL approached for fresh clearances for the project and activists suspect there was suppression of facts.

The Wildlife Protection Act clearly states that NTCA should ensure that tiger reserves and areas linking one protected area or tiger reserve with another protected area or tiger reserve are not diverted for ecologically unsustainable uses, except in public interest and with the approval of the National Board for Wildlife and the advice of NTCA.