

Plan to fell 9,276 eucalyptus trees in Anamudi Shola National Park

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The eucalyptus plantation at Valsappettykudi in Anamudi Shola forest.

KOCHI: The Anamudi Shola National Park, known for its rich flora and fauna, is all set to lose its canopy in 107 acres as the forest department has proposed to fell 9,276 eucalyptus trees. The proposal has been made in the name of the forest rights of 79 families belonging to Muthuvan tribe living in Valsappettykudi tribal settlement colony, and under the government project to remove exotic species and endemic species of plants. However, green activists have alleged that the move is to sell 1,78,613 cubic feet of eucalyptus trees worth Rs 8.17 crore to the timber mafia.

An RTI application to Idukki district collector revealed that the residents of Valsapettykudi have not been provided forest rights and no tribal community has been granted permission to cut down trees even if it belongs to exotic species. The move is in violation of the order issued by former additional chief secretary Niveditha P Haran in 2015, banning the felling of eucalyptus trees in 'Anchunadu' area - which includes Vattavada, Kottakamboor, Kanthalloor, Marayoor and Keezhanthoor villages.

As per the proposal submitted to the government under the Tribal Welfare project, the residents of Valsapettykudi are tribal people who migrated to the region around 300 years ago. An Eco Development Committee has been functioning for the welfare of the tribal people since 2007, which proposed the felling of trees as the eucalyptus trees are drawing excess water leading to water scarcity for cultivation of vegetables, which form the source of livelihood for the tribal people. The proposal also seeks permission to remove the roots of the trees using earth mover and developing the land for terrace farming.

"The whole proposal is a farce as there is no settlement in the area. The list of 79 tribal people holding rights in the 107 acre land is fictitious. The plan is to sell the trees to timber mafia and

facilitate encroachment on the national park. There is another proposal to cut down the trees in Pambadum Shola national park under the guise of developing Kurinji park under the United Nations - sponsored India High Range Mountain Landscape Project (IHRML)," said green activist and Kerala State Animal Welfare Board member M N Jayachandran.

Former top officials of the forest department also opined that the proposal is suspicious. "If the residents have individual rights over their land, they can fell a limited number of trees after getting permission from the empowered committee. But there is no provision to fell such a huge number of trees. The tribal people can extract the trees on their land for their use, but are not entitled to commercial felling.

If the authorities are interested in the welfare of tribal people, they should relocate them to the forest fringe areas. For such large scale felling they need the permission of the National Board for Wildlife," said a retired Principal Chief Conservator of Forests (PCCF). "The trees were planted during the British regime and it had merged with the natural habitat of Munnar. Cutting down trees can cause irreparable loss to the ecosystem," said a retired conservator of forests.

PCCF and chief wildlife warden Surendrakumar said the government has launched a project for phased removal of exotic species and plant endemic species in forest areas. "Trees like acacia and eucalyptus belong to the exotic species and the government has accepted the policy to remove exotic species. However we cannot extract forest produce and sell it commercially," he said.

Proposal

9,276 trees to be cut down

107.04 acres Extent of land

1,78,613.155 cubic feet Quantity of timber

18.17 cr Expected value of timber

79 Number of beneficiaries

RTI reply from Idukki district collector

The government has not issued forest rights to Valsapettykudi.

No tribal community has been given permission to cut down trees like sandalwood, teak, rosewood or eucalyptus.

Ban on felling of eucalyptus in the five villages of Vattavada, Kottakamboor, Kanthalloor, Marayur and Kezhanthoor as per a government order issued in 2015.

Source:<https://www.newindianexpress.com/states/kerala/2020/oct/22/plan-to-fell-9276-eucalyptus-trees-in-anamudi-shola-national-park-2213425.html>