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Scented Marayoor forests under the threat of declassification and spike disease

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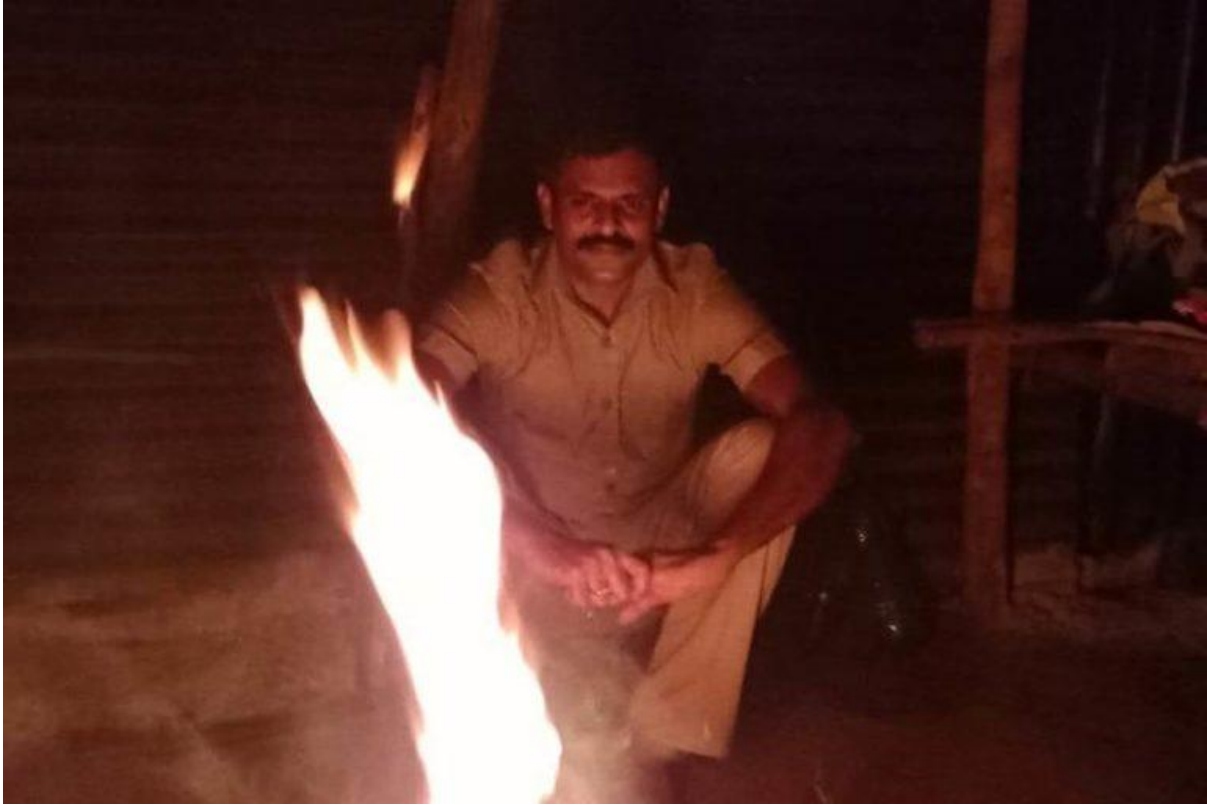
The Marayoor sandalwood reserve in Kerala, spread over 1,460.77 hectares, close to one-sixth the size of Kochi, is currently one of the [very few forests with high-quality sandalwood](#) in India. While it is a highly monitored area to prevent smuggling and degradation, there is now threat from the state's revenue department which wants to declassify and hand over a part of the area for private and commercial activities.

As per the latest estimate, the number of sandalwood trees in the Marayoor reserve is 57,000, and the estimated value is Rs. 30 billion (3,000 crores). As a [highly-priced forest patch in India](#), Marayoor is guarded round the clock by armed forest guards and watchers as well as thermal infrared cameras aimed at protecting the forest from smugglers and brigands. Before the division came up in 2005, Marayoor's sandalwood forests were known for large-scale [felling and smuggling](#) by lobbies operating across the whole of South India. As Marayoor sandals have high oil content and huge amounts of hardwood, they are very much in demand globally. Aside from its economic value due to demand for sandalwood in the global market, Marayoor is also a crucial forest patch that connects the national parks of Eravikulam, Chinnar, Kurinjimala, Anamudi and Pambadum Sholai, explained S. Ranjith, the divisional forest officer in-charge of Marayoor Sandal Division. "Animals from the forests of Munnar division too, frequent these forests, supporting the proposed reserves of Koodakkad and Theerthamalai. The reserve has many wild animals, including elephants and Indian bison," he said.

Sandalwood trees are a partial root parasite, and they don't survive by themselves. They need hosts for their nutrition requirements. Therefore, the saplings are planted along with other trees. "As sandal trees do not grow exclusively and require the presence of other species, the Marayoor forest has a rich biodiversity," he added.

Even as these efforts are on to protect the forest, the state's Revenue Department is acting to unilaterally declassify around 119.787 hectares of the forests as rocky, barren lands with no conservation-related importance and to be transferred to private parties for non-agricultural and commercial activities. A sizeable portion has already been declassified and allotted to private individuals, predominantly local settlers, and more efforts are underway. Despite strong objections from the Forest Department, which has documents to prove the said area has been under its custody for at least 88 years, attempts to declassify the area are on.

Moreover, the Forest Department's attempts to [erect chain-linked walls](#) to the whole reserve area to prevent encroachment are being met with disapproval. In March this year, the village officer of Keezhanthur in Marayoor, led revenue officials and local politicians to remove the already installed chain-linked walls saying rocky, barren terrains would not be forest lands, and the department has rights to give them away to local individuals. The inter-department tussles ignoring the environmental importance of Marayoor forests now pose a significant threat to conservation in the region.



Night patrolling to protect the sandal forests from smugglers. Photo by K.A. Shaji.

When Mongabay-India reached out to the Keezhanthur Village Officer through the Right To Information (RTI) act seeking reasons for removing chain-linked fences, the reply that reached on October 26, denied any such attempt. The reply stated that the revenue department has no dispute with anybody on its land in the Keezhathur region. However, documents available from the Forest Department and news from vernacular media report otherwise.

“The reserve boundary is mentioned in the [1933 gazette notification](#), and since then, the boundaries have been consolidated by erecting permanent cairns,” said Ranjith.

A set of documents, including a gazette notification issued by the Princely State of Travancore on February 28, 1938, accessed by Mongabay-India under the Right to Information Act, confirm that these are original reserve forests that have existed for long. Other communications between forest officials and top officials of the state government, accessed by Mongabay-India, claim that these rocky lands are best suited for replanting sandalwood trees, which were lost over the years because of human interventions.

History of the sandalwood forests of Marayoor

When British-Indian planter turned botanist [T. F. Bourdillon](#) was appointed as the conservator of forests in the princely state of Travancore in 1886, the first task given to him was that of exploring the surrounding forests and taking stock of their resources. Later known for his highly acclaimed research work for the book [The Forests of Travancore](#), Bourdillon travelled extensively in the princely state and recorded its rich biodiversity apart from the peculiarities and geographical aspects of different parts of the present southern Kerala region.

On December 29, 1892, Bourdillon reached Kilikoodu Mala alias Kilikuda Hill on the upper reaches of the present-day hill station [Munnar](#) and discovered an exclusive 12 sq.km. forest of [Santalum album](#) or Indian sandalwood. Endemic to South India and Southeast Asia, the Indian sandalwood tree is considered sacred by Hindus and many indigenous cultures. Distinct fragrance and medicinal qualities make it a high-value species vulnerable to overexploitation.

Bourdillon describes Kilikoodu as a part of [Anjunadu](#) hills and valleys with scant rainfall and a dry climate. He wrote that the peculiar climate there, which is in sharp contrast with what exists in Munnar, helps the sandalwood trees thrive and reproduce naturally without any human assistance.

The local tribal community adored the trees, but occasionally they removed the slightly sharp barks of the tree to eat them with lemon; Bourdillon records in *Forests of Travancore*, which is now regarded as a unique registry of Kerala's flora and fauna. Before reaching Anjunadu, he had spotted the same trees in the princely state of Mysore apart from the Island of Timor and some parts of Java. Bourdillon certified the local sandalwood of Anjunadu as the most scented among those which he analysed.

Over the years, Anjunadu was rechristened as Marayoor, and its scented and priceless sandalwood forests became [India's only forest division of that kind](#). While most of Tamil Nadu and Karnataka's sandalwood forests have been degraded by sandalwood smuggler [Veerappan](#), as well as the fast-spreading virus disease Sandal Spike, Marayoor has managed to gain global attention as the hub of original, naturally-grown sandalwood trees.

[Marayoor sandalwood](#) has been branded the best quality sandalwood in the country by the Institute of Wood Science and Technology (IWST). This is consistently cited as the main reason for its growing demand in the cosmetic and perfume industries.

Attempts to declassify areas of conservational importance

“Even Kilikoodu Mala, where Bourdillon first saw sandalwoods of Anjunadu, is part of the areas in which the Revenue Department demands declassification. It is a region where sandalwood trees once flourished,” said divisional officer Ranjith. “Mafia plundered even the last sandal tree from there much before the Marayoor Sandalwood Division came into existence two decades ago. Now, we are in the process of a legal fight to win back the lands that the Revenue Department is declassifying and assigning to private individuals, violating norms,” he said.

K. Ganapathy, a tribal person from the Hill Pulaya Community of the locality, said that his family got permission under the Forest Rights Act to construct a house in a portion of Kilikoodu a few years ago. However, he abandoned and left the house, which was half-constructed because the rocky area had no access to drinking water and no option for agriculture. “Only sandals can grow there. Though located close to hill station Munnar, it's a rain shadow region with a peculiar climate helpful for the growth of sandalwood. How can I survive there without agriculture or water?” he asks. According to him, 190 tribal families were recently awarded forest rights in the region, but all have left it, saying it would be difficult for them to survive there. They now attempt to hand over the areas to some influential settlers who have intentions for quarrying and other non-forestry activities.



A godown with sandalwood from Marayoor. Photo by K.A. Shaji.

With a strong lobby supporting the Revenue Department, the Forest Department aims to approach the Kerala High Court for justice.

Other than land encroachments and land declassification, what ails the sandalwood forests is a vector-transmitted disease known as [sandal spike disease](#). According to Ranjith, the disease prevalent in Mysore and Sathyamangalam forests from the beginning of the twentieth century has crippled them and has now reached Marayoor. The disease causes an extreme reduction in leaf size apart from stiffening and reduction of internode length. “The disease, along with the damage done by Veerappan, had ruined sandal forests of Tamil Nadu and Karnataka. Now it has reached Marayoor to kill trees on a large scale despite our conservation efforts. The virus has no cure,” said Ranjith.

Source:<https://india.mongabay.com/2021/12/scented-marayoor-forests-under-the-threat-of-declassification-and-spike-disease/>