

TNAU experts identify native grasses, fodder trees to improve elephant habitats

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A group of experts from the Tamil Nadu Agricultural University (TNAU) and its Forest College and Research Institute (FC&RI) at Mettupalayam has undertaken a project to identify native grasses and trees palatable for elephants and standardise mass multiplication techniques.

The Forest Department set up the eight-member group earlier this year after realising that the areas occupied by native grasses and fodder trees in the wild have been degraded.

The team recently submitted an interim report after identifying 29 native grass species and 14 fodder tree species that are palatable for elephants and other herbivores. It also started a nursery for growing these species on the FC&RI campus.



The 43 species of grasses and trees identified by the team are palatable for elephants. ■ FILE PHOTO

“The main objective of the project is to improve the quality of the elephant habitats by restoring them with native grasses and fodder trees,” D. Venkatesh, District Forest Officer of Coimbatore Forest Division.

In the next level, the team will assess their nutritive value and to standardise mass multiplication technology for planting in the lower slopes of the Nilgiris and in

Coimbatore Forest Division, fodder quality of which have been assessed to have degraded due to the spread of invasive species like the *Lantana camara*.

“All the 43 species of grasses and trees identified by the team are palatable for elephants and other herbivores. Among these, the team will select those species with the highest nutritive value and standardise tech-

niques for their multiplication for planting,” said K. Baranidharan from the Department of Forest Products and Wildlife at FC&RI, one of the principal investigators.

Leaves and plant parts of the 29 native fodder grass species and 14 fodder tree species have been shade dried and powdered for characterising nutritional and anti-nutritional values.

I. Anwardeen, Additional Principal Chief Conservator of Forests (Coimbatore Circle), said that the reserve forests in the region had diversity of wild grasses which slowly degraded due to factors such as excessive grazing and spread of invasive species.

“Sufficient grasslands and grass meadows should be available for the survival of a herbivore species. Once we identify the grasses and get

an idea on the multiplication techniques, large scale sowing and broadcasting can be done to support various species,” he said.

According to him, the Department did successful restoration of native grasses in Kalakkad Mundanthurai Tiger Reserve where it removed non-breakable coarse grasses and replaced them with browsable grasses in natural water pond areas. “The idea is to create small pockets of grasslands and meadows. Good diverse fodder availability will improve the health of the wildlife and they can withstand diseases, droughts etc.,” he said.

K.T. Parthiban, Dean (Forestry) of FC&RI, M.P. Divya, R. Ravi, S. Manivasakan and M. Vijayabhama from FC&RI and S. Geetha and K.N. Ganesan from TNAU are other experts in the group.