

Mass death of eucalyptus trees raises concerns in the Nilgiris

It is a typical sign of “forest dieback,” say conservationists

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The death of eucalyptus trees, en masse, is being reported around Udhagamandalam town and parts of the Nilgiris, threatening the livelihoods of hundreds of people who rely on them, and also causing concern among conservationists.

The eucalyptus, which is an invasive species of flora, was planted in large numbers by the British in the areas surrounding Udhagamandalam town and across the Nilgiris. The leaves of the tree are gathered and used to produce eucalyptus oil by hundreds of daily wage workers every day, mostly women, who hand them in to eucalyptus oil distilleries.

The workers have been noticing the mass death of the trees over the last year, which they say is characterised by the trees dying from the “top-down,” with the top branches first being affected, and the tree slowly withering away. Conservationists believe that the death of the trees are a typical sign of “forest dieback,” defined as accelerated tree mortality in

any given area, characterised by the woody extremities of the trees first being affected and gradually spreading to the tree and resulting in its ultimate death.

P. Sangavathy, a 70-year-old resident of Khandal who has been collecting eucalyptus leaves to supply to eucalyptus oil manufactures since she was 10-years-old, said that she had never seen death of eucalyptus trees on such a scale. “The trees are dying and we are very afraid of whether there will be any leaves left to harvest in a few years,” she said.

R. Ayyammal, another eucalyptus leaf harvester, said that previously, she could collect around 20 kg of eucalyptus leaves each day, but now that quantity has dwindled to around half in the areas surrounding the Sandynallah Reservoir. “Though we are managing to collect more leaves which fall off the main tree, the weight of each leaf is significantly less than before, and the leaves look like they have been afflicted with some kind of disease,” she said.

The mass death of thou-



Eucalyptus trees seen with dried leaves at Thalaikundah near Udhagamandalam.

■ M . SATHYAMOORTHY

sands of trees is being seen in Buttfire, Thalakundah, Sandynallah and Kuruthukulli, all in the immediate vicinity of Udhagamandalam town, said M. Rasheed, who runs a eucalyptus distillery in Udhagamandalam.

Mr. Rasheed said that till last year, he could distill around 10-12 litres of eucalyptus oil, but now can only manufacture around four litres a day. “The quantity of leaves has also come down drastically, from 600 kg a day last year to just 200-300

kg this year,” he added.

However, conservationists believe that the death of the eucalyptus trees are just one part of a much wider issue of forest dieback affecting many species of flora, including native, indigenous trees across the Nilgiris.

Godwin Vasanth Bosco, a restoration ecologist working in the Nilgiris, said that wattle trees, another invasive flora species, have been dying in large numbers in the Western edge, near Kolaribetta and Pandiar, while Shola forests are also exhibiting troubling signs of forest dieback across the Nilgiris.

Climate change

“I believe these deaths are the first manifestations of climate change and excess carbon emissions, which has weakened the trees and have made them more susceptible to disease or becoming negatively affected by extreme weather,” said Mr. Bosco.

Forest department officials said that they had noticed the tree deaths, but said that the death were only occurring in a few sporadic areas. They said that more research needed to be undertaken to understand the causes.