

# Research site threatens wetland in the Nilgiris



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The wetland in Aramby Reserve Forest where around 3,000 eucalyptus trees have been planted. | Photo Credit: Rohan Premkumar

## The area is home to many species of wild animals

A research site threatens a prime wetland ecosystem in Udhagamandalam after the research wing of the Tamil Nadu Biodiversity Conservation and Greening Project planted around

3,000 eucalyptus trees in Aramby reserve forest, near RC Colony, in the Nilgiris in 2015.

Around 3,000 *Eucalyptus Globulus*, *Eucalyptus Grandis* and *Eucalyptus Eugenoides* saplings have been planted on a one hectare plot on a piece of wetland by the Forest Genetics Circle, Coimbatore under a project tailored to study ways to “maximise fuel wood production.” The project is said to have been funded by the Japanese International Cooperation Agency.

The area is home to many species of wild animal, including deer and gaur, while there are pockets of shola trees also nearby.

The decision to grow *Eucalyptus* at the site by the forest department has been met with widespread criticism by activists, who have for years been trying to get the department to restore grasslands and native shola tree species to the landscape, and instead, will now have to fight to get rid of more invasive tree species which this time have been introduced by the forest department itself.

Gokul Halan, an additional co-ordinator working at the Keystone Foundation in Kotagiri, speaking to *The Hindu* said that wetlands are a very important ecosystem which also play a key role in supporting other ecosystems. “The eucalyptus trees, if left alone for the next decade, will suck up a lot of water from the ground and have a massive impact on water tables and perched aquifers,” he said.

In plantations of eucalyptus and wattle, the soil can also eventually turn acidic and won't allow anything to grow. “To reverse such effects will also take a very long time,” added Mr. Halan.

Similarly, Vasanth Bosco, a conservationist working at restoring grasslands in the Nilgiris, said that the presence of sedge and pennisetum at the site are indicators of a wetland ecosystem. He said that eucalyptus saplings use plenty of groundwater during their growing phase leading to watershed depletion. He added that once

the trees grow larger, and start shedding leaves, there would be very little chance for any grasses to grow underneath them.

“It would have made sense if there was an effort to restore grasslands at the site instead,” said Mr. Bosco.

Forest Department officials, speaking to *The Hindu*, said that the site was used purely for research purposes to study ways in which the production of fuel wood can be maximised. A top official said that the department had stopped planting of eucalyptus since 1996, and that this project was purely research oriented.

However, conservationists still questioned the need to study ways to maximise generation and use of fuel wood, as more renewable energy resources have been in use for many decades.

They added that there was plenty of fuel wood that can be harvested from eucalyptus plantations in the Nilgiris itself, and that there was little need to explore possibilities of growing more such trees.