

Eco-restoration project in Kotagiri provides safe haven for animals, water for residents

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Happy Valley habitat restoration project was kick started in 2006

An eco-restoration project, involving the replanting of trees native to the Western Ghats on a small patch of land in Kotagiri, has not only proved beneficial for local wildlife, but also for the people living in the area.

The Keystone Foundation, in collaboration with the Kotagiri Town Panchayat, began the Happy Valley habitat restoration project in 2006. Located just below the Keystone campus in Kotagiri, the project was supported by the Small Grants Programme of The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN). More than 10 years after the project was started, one-acre patch of forest has become a safe refuge for more than 10 species of birds, and 3 species of mammals, including the gaur, leopard and wild boar, while also ensuring that the communities of people living downstream get enough water to meet their needs.

Speaking to The Hindu , Shiny Miriam Rehel, programme co-ordinator for the Biodiversity Restoration Programme at Keystone Foundation, said that around 340 saplings of native Shola tree species were planted along a section of the slope bordering a wetland which serves as the source of water for households living downstream.

“The saplings planted belong to 30 common varieties of Shola trees, like the Syzigium, Celtis tetrandra and others, while they were buffeted on the peripheries with shrubs and woody climbers, also native to the region” said Ms. Shiny. The restoration team aimed to replicate, as best as possible, the composition of a typical Shola forest.

T Balachander, programme co-ordinator for Water and Sanitation at Keystone Foundation, said that while they have not been able to consistently measure the discharge rate from the spring flowing into the wetland in Happy Valley, they have observed that the spring and the wells downstream have never gone dry, even during periods of drought, like during the extreme summer of 2017, when water became scarce in most parts of the Nilgiris.

Depression spring

“The spring in Happy Valley is what is known as a depression spring, meaning the water flows down a slope and onto a flat land surface. So by reforesting the slope or catchment area for the spring with Shola trees and other native flora, it will definitely have a beneficial effect on the base water flow,” said Mr. Balachander.

He added that there were 45 wetlands and springs in the Kotagiri region, and said that a replication of the project, tailored to suit each site on a case-by-case basis, could lead to better watershed management across the region.