

Plantations to turn into forests

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A wattle plantation in the Nilgiris. The Institute plans to take up a study on wattle and eucalyptus plantations in the area. Photo: IFGTB

Institute of Forest Genetics and Tree Breeding has started work on 60 hectares in Andamans

With several plantations likely to end their leases in the coming years, scientists are thinking ahead of means to convert them into natural forests. Coimbatore-based Institute of Forest Genetics and Tree Breeding (IFGTB) has launched a project on a 60-hectare extent in the Andamans and it is in the process of successfully converting the teak and padauk plantations into near natural forests.

Giving details about the programme to *The Hindu*, N. Krishnakumar, Director of IFGTB said the basic idea of the programme was to restore the ecology of the place with an intention to convert it into a natural forest. Forests not only provided shelter and shade to the fauna, but also provided feed to them. Already, forest departments in various States were trying out this method to convert abandoned plantations into forests, he said.

The programme was implemented with two main objectives, the first of which was to support the regeneration of plants, shrubs and other flora by doing soil work and introducing micro organisms, thereby creating a favourable atmosphere for

regeneration. The next step was to plant saplings deliberately to increase the density of natural species.

To implement the second part, a study on the ecological features of the plantations was taken up in comparison to the natural forest around. First, the officials introduced herbs and shrubs, followed by small trees and finally, canopy-forming trees were planted in the area. Following this, a planting design was adopted to ensure the survival of all the planted species. Simultaneously, at periodical intervals, the crops in the plantation area could be cleared. In the Andamans and Kerala, the Institute, along with local Forest department authorities, is clearing abandoned plantations which are being converted into natural forests. The Institute has a plan to take up a study on wattle and eucalyptus plantations in the Nilgiris and teak plantations in Kerala, Dr. Krishnakumar said.

Before taking up the conversion, all the human-caused stresses have to be removed from the abandoned plantations. Similarly, efforts have to be made to ensure the flow of seeds from the natural forest into the plantation area, which will enhance the conversion process, he said. These plantations have the potential to harbour natural vegetation and wildlife and the process should make more wildlife move into the converted plantations, he added.

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