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NATIONAL

In southern India's tea country, small but mighty efforts are brewing to bring back native forests

Wali, part of Adivasi Indigenous community, carries water collected from a stream in Banagudi village in Nilgiris district, India, Thursday, Sept. 26, 2024. (AP Photo/Aijaz Rahi)

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UDHAGAMANDALAM, India (AP) — Scattered groves of native trees, flowers and the occasional prehistoric burial ground are squeezed between hundreds of thousands of tea shrubs in southern India's Nilgiris region — a gateway to a time before colonization and the commercial growing of tea that reshaped the country's mountain landscapes.

These sacred groves once blanketed the Western Ghats mountains, but nearly 200 years ago, British colonists installed rows upon rows of tea plantations. The few groves that stand today are either protected by Indigenous communities who preserve them for their faith and traditions, or are being grown and tended back into existence by ecologists who remove tea trees from disused farms and plant seeds native to this biodiverse region. It takes decades, but their efforts are finally starting to see results as forests flourish despite ecological damage and wilder weather caused by climate change.

The teams bringing back the forests — home to more than 600 native plants and 150 animal species found only here — know that they still need to work around their neighbors. Nearly

everyone in the region's more than 700,000-strong population either farms black, green and white tea or works with the almost 3 million tourists who come to escape the searing heat of the Indian plains.

"In this time of climate change, I think ecological restoration and rewilding is extremely important," said Godwin Vasanth Bosco, a Nilgiris-based naturalist and restoration practitioner. "What we're trying to do is to help nature restore itself."

Degraded land and climate change threaten communities

Environmentalists say industrial-scale tea farming has destroyed the soil's nutrients and led to conflict with animals like elephants and gaur, or Indian bison, that have little forest left to live in.

Estimates say nearly 135,000 acres of tea have been planted across the mountains, damaging close to 70% of native grasslands and forests.

"There is no biological diversity," Gokul Halan, a Nilgiris-based water expert, said of the tea farms. "It doesn't support the local fauna nor is it a food source."

The forests among the tea farms are recognized by the United Nations as one of the world's eight " hottest hotspots for biodiversity," but the areas degraded by excessive pesticide use and other commercial farming methods have been dubbed "green deserts" by environmentalists for their poor soil and inability to support other life.

The Nilgiris region has also had to clear land to facilitate the increasing number of tourists and people from India's plains who are moving to the region.

Poorer land makes it more vulnerable to landslides and flooding, which are now more common because of human-caused climate change. The neighboring mountainous region of Wayanad suffered devastating landslides that killed nearly 200 people earlier this year, and Halan warns Nilgiris may suffer a similar fate.

Halan also warned the region is susceptible to long droughts and excess heat because of climate change, and that's already affected some tea harvests.

Restoring forests brings life back to Nilgiris

In a small mountain fold just a few hundred meters below the region's tallest peak, native trees planted 10 years ago have grown up to 4.5 meters (15 feet) tall. A stream flows amid the young trees that replaced nearly 7 acres of tea plants.

"This whole place was tea plantations and this stream was not flowing throughout the year," said Bosco, the ecologist. "Since we began our restoration work, it flows through the year and the trees

and bamboo have grown well along the stream."

The forests are known as Shola-grassland forests or cloud forests because they can capture moisture from high-altitude mist.

Bosco said the plants and trees have an "incredible capacity to provide for life" across the nearly 2,000 acres his organization works to restore. The native trees maintain the microclimate underneath them by providing nutrients to the soil. That helps saplings and small plants grow even during hot, dry summers.

The region is also home to several Indigenous communities, called Adivasi, many of them classified as highly vulnerable with only a few thousand of their people remaining.

Representatives of these Adivasi communities consider themselves the original custodians of the forests and have also restored forests in the region. They say such restoration initiatives are welcome.

"When the British built tea estates, we were kicked out to the fringes of this district, our lands were lost and we lost our traditions because of deforestation," said Mani Raman, who belongs to the Alu Kurumbar Adivasi community.

"Such restoration work is good. By bringing the forests back, the wildlife and birds will get more food. Animals that have moved out of forests will have a place to live," he said.

Tea growers still need a livelihood

Tea growers and factory owners say that the region's entire economy depends on tea and it is relatively less harmful to the local environment compared to rampant development to cater to tourism.

"To convert tea to grasslands and shola forests will have a negative impact on the region's economy and environment," said A. Balakrishnan, the owner of a two-year-old tea factory near the town of Kotagiri in the Nilgiris.

Eighty-year-old I. Bhojan, who's been a tea grower all his life, agrees. "There is no Nilgiris without tea," he said.

Bhojan, president of the small farmers and tea growers welfare association for the Nilgiris, estimates that around 600,000 people — 50,000 of them small farmers — depend on tea for their livelihood.

Balakrishnan argued that tea plants are maintained well given their economic benefits compared to native forests.

“If tea was not there, Nilgiris will become a place for tourists only, there’ll be more construction and urbanization,” he said.

Finding common ground

Planting woody trees and shrubs in tea plantations, known as agroforestry, can ease the battle for space between farms and restoration, according to some experts.

Other crops and timber “can make tea plantations a bit more biodiverse compared to what is there currently,” said water expert Halan.

Officials of Tamil Nadu state, of which the Nilgiris district is a part, earmarked $24 million earlier this year to encourage farmers to shift away from chemical-laden fertilizers to help preserve soil health. The state’s forest department officials also announced plans last year to plant nearly 60,000 native trees in the region.

Restoration ecologist Bosco said adding value to smaller tea farming operations by growing special, higher-quality tea on smaller parcels of land can open up more land to reforestation without hurting farmers’ pockets.

He added that if those working to restore the land were paid for that service, that could be another stream of revenue for residents, as well as sourcing new products to sell from the native plants. “For example, we’re trying to come up with products from some of the plants that have medicinal value,” he said.

Raman added that future such work could also learn from Adivasi traditional practices.

“Adivasi people have been protecting forests for so long, wherever we live the forests are protected,” he said. “The state government should be taking such work up at large scale.”

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