

# Sacred groves in TN under threat

## None Of The 704 Documented By Researchers Are Notified Officially

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**Chennai:** India may soon lose its biodiversity heritage sites if its governments do not speed up conservation documentation, according to the National Biodiversity Authority.

Only one, out of an estimated one lakh sacred groves, and 13,000 groves documented by researchers and institutions, has been officially notified by a government. Karnataka has declared Nallur tamarind grove at Devanahalli near Bangalore, a Biodiversity Heritage Site.

Sacred groves are mini-biospheres with religious significance and excellent indicators of local biodiversity health, especially because local communities participate to protect them. Normally left undisturbed, they could be forest patches or fallow lands near villages, and host folk deities. Deadwood collection is banned too in some groves.



**CRYING FOR ATTENTION:** A sacred grove in Villupuram district

The National Biodiversity Authority, a bio-piracy watchdog that prods state governments into documenting such groves under its Biodiversity Heritage Sites component, has insisted on more such official declarations to influence green policy and better protection.

Rapid urbanization has posed a threat to even Nallur

grove besides many such forest sites in Tamil Nadu, besides decadence through formal worship forms taking over nature friendly folk worship. This has eroded their original purpose, say experts.

Tamil Nadu has 704 groves documented by researchers, but not officially notified, say experts from CPREEC (C P Ra-

masamy Environmental Education Centre) that has restored 50 sacred groves in the state.

"Currently we use books by researchers and documents. But it is the responsibility of states to enlist sacred groves," said National Biodiversity Authority chairman PL Gautam. In Tamil Nadu's state records, a chunk of such patches is recorded as poramboke land, despite local communities owning them in principle. India's sacred groves are not blessed with legislative protection. Lack of documentation only hinders better steps in protecting them, say officials at NBA.

Conservators disagree. They feel better government approach for conserving them should matter more than official notifications.

"Forests were officially notified too, but got encroached! It does not make a difference," noted director of CPR Environmental Education Centre

Nanditha Krishna. "The pride of ownership should rest with local people. It is they who should protect them," she said. M Amirthalingam of CPREEC, who surveyed 450 sacred groves in Tamil Nadu, noted that with formal forms of worship invading folk culture, temple construction had begun in such groves, eroding their biodiversity.

"The Puthupet grove in Villupuram district was a thicketed tropical dry evergreen forest of 25 acres. People feared entering it 15 years back. Recently we found people using motorcycles inside. People have become defiant to local beliefs. Now, temple authorities cleared trees near the sanctum sanctorum of the small open air shrine and built a temple with granite, cement and brick. Sacred groves should have local deities, with vermilion and turmeric on stone or trees," said Amirthalingam.