

HOW CITIZEN GROUPS IN KERALA ARE PLANTING MANGROVES AS THE FIRST LINE OF DEFENCE AGAINST COASTAL FLOODING

Relevant for: Environment | Topic: Disaster and disaster management

Vanishing greenery: Large tracts of mangroves have been destroyed in the district. A view of a mangrove tree in Kumbalangi village in Ernakulam. | Photo Credit: [H. Vibhu](#)

After his fishing is done for the day, Murukesan TP, a fisherman from Malipuram near Vypeen, waits for the tide to recede. He then steers his small rice boat along the coastline, towards the exposed mud flats, and plants mangrove saplings; something he has been doing for the past five years, since the tsunami made him realise that mangroves were the first line of defence against flood waters or a hungry sea.

On Sunday, he will assist a group of cyclists and nature lovers to plant 200 saplings along the shores of North Mulavakkad, an island near Goshree Bridge. Last month the Kerala High Court Advocates Association requested him to plant 100 saplings on the Chathiyath waterfront to fortify the embankment and 30 members joined him.

“The awareness about the efficacy of mangroves has increased manifold since last year’s flood. Both corporates, as part of their CSR activities, and individuals have taken to planting mangroves and maintaining them,” says MA Anaz, Assistant Conservator, Social Forestry, Ernakulam Division. His office carried out a conservation programme last September to replace the polybags in which the saplings were placed with bamboo sleeves.

“The city itself was built on mangroves,” says KK Reghuraj, farm superintendent at the Kerala University of Fisheries and Ocean Studies. Around a 100 years ago, Kochi had 700 square-kilometres of mangrove cover, he adds. According to a survey conducted by the Kerala Shastra Sahitya Parishad in 2010, Kerala has 26 square-kilometres of mangrove cover. However, a government survey puts the figure at 17 square-kilometres. In Kerala, Kannur has the largest area of mangroves, followed by Kochi

Murukesan is in great demand for his traditional knowledge and expertise and employed by the Social Forestry Department to create this green protective layer of several species of trees.

“Mangroves have many advantages. It prevents soil erosion, protects the coastline and has its own ecological natural habitat. The floods of these two years made us think of what we could do to check flood waters and strengthen our coastline. Planting mangroves seemed the best and obvious method,” says Abraham Clancy, of Cochin Bikers, the organiser of the Sunday event.

Cyclist and environmentalist Manoj Ravindran, who is part of the planting programme, says, “Mangroves appear naturally in saline water but reclamation and construction of buildings led to their destruction. That’s why it is important that we now consciously plant mangroves.”

Mangroves are to a coastal area what rain forests are to the Western Ghats, says Manoj Kumar IB, an environmentalist and advocate of fruit forests. They are extremely important in maintaining a peaceful coastal ecosystem, as they form a natural seawall. Vypeen and other islands of Kochi had a rich mangrove cover, but much, especially along the Container Terminal Road, was lost to indiscriminate felling. “People don’t really understand the value of mangroves,” he says. Mangrove trees grow only in tidal marshes. They are a rich zone of biodiversity, as they

are the main breeding grounds of brackish water fish species. The trees offer sanctuary to a number of bird species.. They play an active role in carbon sequestration, too.

“For the people living in the islands of Kadamakkudy, Pizhala, Vypeen and such, the mangroves could even be a source of water. As the trees suck up the salt, the water around it has low salinity,” Manoj says.

Murukesan — assisted by his family, brother Vinod and wife Geeta — has created a nursery of 15,000 plants. The most common is the green-coloured plant but a new yellow-leafed species is what Murkesan is excited about. Self-taught and learning on the subject by watching TV, he says he has been urging the government to create a “green belt” around the coastline.

He has planted trees along the coast of Vypeen, Cherai, Cheranelloor, Pizhala, Kadamakkudy, North Paravur, and Kumbalangini. Along with planting, he also cleans the coastline. Anaz says that the government is seriously working towards increasing mangrove cover around the coastline and Murukesan is one of the main warriors in this. “A proposal to declare Puthuvype as reserved mangrove is on the cards,” says Anaz.

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