

A MOVEMENT TO ROOT OUT INVASIVE ALIEN SPECIES

Relevant for: Indian Economy | Topic: Agriculture Issues and related constraints

Members of the 'Movement Against Biological Invasions' weeding out invasive alien species in Pune. Special Arrangement

Dr. Sachin Punekar is a man on a mission: the noted city-based botanist, finding his world of flora and fauna increasingly under siege from invasive alien species (IAS), has launched a green forum to combat the menace.

Dr. Punekar, along with a number of environmentalists, retired Forest Department authorities, farmers, green activists and other stakeholders has come together to form a forum called Movement Against Biological Invasions (MABI) – a green movement aimed at systematically charting and rooting out IAS.

The Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) defines IAS as “an alien species whose introduction and spread threaten ecosystems, habitats, or species with socio-cultural, economic and environmental harm and harm to human health”.

“Forest-invasive species can supplant native plants, eliminate food and cover for wildlife and threaten rare plant and animal species,” says Dr. Punekar, adding that the impact of globalisation leading to the increased movement of people, trade and de-forestation have led to the introduction of IAS in the indigenous environment in massive quantities.

‘Spread is alarming’

“The spread of IAS spread is alarming and is wiping out local native species like grasses and other herbaceous species. As a result, the local food chain is afflicted with the IAS competing for space and light with native flora. For instance, the Cosmos sulphureus IAS is now almost taking up all the space in roadside shrubbery and is widely prevalent in Pune,” he notes.

MABI has so far conducted several ‘obnoxious weed eradication’ drives in various parts of Maharashtra as well as across the country, namely in Northeastern States like Sikkim.

Seeds of the MABI movement were sown in 2016 when a “bonfire” was organised by Dr. Punekar’s environmental NGO Biospheres on the occasion of Holi in association with the Pune Municipal Corporation and State Forest Department.

Each week, green spaces in Pune district hum with the activity of MABI members, determinedly rooting out IAS and holding weed bonfires. “The knock-on effects of unchecked IAS are alarming. These species can change the functions of ecosystems and increase losses in forestry and natural resource management costs, while also posing a danger to biological diversity and other human enterprises – as well as to human health,” says Dr. Punekar.

He further observes the potential threat to livestock health as the IAS hamper the growth of native grasses which are fodder species for herbivores and livestock. “Some IAS are poisonous which may cause allergies and skin diseases among the animals. Furthermore, given that it is virtually impossible to segregate pure fodder from IAS, the chances that livestock will be consuming adulterated fodder is high,” Dr. Punekar said.

Another indirect effect of the rise in IAS is a heightening of the man-animal conflict.

“The widespread prevalence of IAS like Lantana camara has reduced the proportion of natural grasses for herbivorous animals forcing their movement to human habitats in search of paddy crops and other edible items. This has resulted in the movement of animals like the Indian gaur and the chinkara (Indian gazelle) from their natural habitats to human settlements, thus endangering them,” Dr. Puneekar said.

Spreading awareness

Given the poor appreciation of this phenomenon in India and other developing countries, awareness was generally low regarding IAS and its baneful effects.

“Policymakers and other stakeholders are not yet sensitised to the magnitude of problem. So, awareness is our first priority,” he says.

One of the MABI’s prime objectives is to help farmers improve their productivity by identifying IAS and rooting it out. Through seminars, workshops, slideshows, video teasers, documentary, information brochures, the forum is helping making people literate about various aspects of IAS.

“On an average, 32% of the farmers’ budget goes into the control of weeds, which includes the regular spraying of insecticide and labour costs. Moreover, weeds change according to climatic conditions,” says Maruti Chavan, a farmer from Indapur in Pune district. He added that unchecked growth of IAS was baneful for soil health, which was prone to faster deterioration.

To help farmers relate better to the phenomenon, the MABI has hit upon the idea of using historical analogies to explain the potential ill-effects of IAS.

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