

# From Landscape Understanding to Restoration Planning: A Mentorship Field Report from the Anamalai Foothills, Tamil Nadu.

## Introduction

As a part of the 15 days mentorship program under the Ram Hattikuddur Advanced Training in Conservation, the fellows were split into three different teams and were sent to places with different landscapes. We were all assigned the task to understand the landscape, search for a potential restoration plot and to come up with a detailed restoration plan for that plot. Our team went to Sethumadai, a place at the foothills of Anamalais, Tamil Nadu for 10 days, from 16 to 25 December 2025.

## Interaction with Mr. Sarvanan

After reaching Sethumadai, we first interacted with Mr. Sarvanan, the owner of Iyal Thottam farm. He shared how he has been doing organic farming there since the last 14–15 years. He owns about 18 acres of land there, with all coconut and arecanut plantations. He also discussed how chemical farming done in all the adjacent farms affect the soil, microbes, and other biodiversity.

We explained our motive and intentions to him, to which he said there's no abandoned farms in the area that we can take up for restoration. He suggested that we should visit the forest area in order to understand the landscape. He also mentioned that a tribe called the Malasars live in the forest with whom we can talk. He connected us to a local guide who could accompany us for a trek in the forest.

## Trek to Sarkarpathy Village through the forest

A local person took us for a trek to Sarkarpathy Village through the nearby forest. We observed quite a long stretch of invasives and non-natives by the trail, like *Lantana camara*, *Chromolaena odorata*, etc. On one side of the trail there was a huge water canal which is a part of the Parambikulam-Aliyar Project.

We got to see many dung, scats, and pellets samples of elephants, bears, dholes and other wild ungulates respectively. In the mix of native and non-native trees, on the other side of the canal; there were also some tussock grass patches on the rocky surfaces.

It was when we reached a view-point, we got to observe the vegetation and plantations at the foothills. It looked beautiful at the first sight until we could see the mosaics of the non-native





**Trek with a local guide. © S. Naufal Nazium.**



**Water canal along the trail. © Srijita Pal.**



**Fresh Bear scat. © Srijita Pal.**



**Tussock grass patch. © Srijita Pal.**



**View of vegetation at the foothills from the view point. © M. Nishigandha.**

*Eucalyptus*, invasive vegetation, and Coconut plantation along the horizon.

We observed butterflies like Blue Mormon, Southern Birdwing, along with many birds like, Asian Fairy Bluebird, Crested Serpent Eagle, Paradise Flycatcher, Lesser Flameback, etc. We also saw an Indian Giant Squirrel feeding on a *Ficus* sp. tree.

At Sarkarpathy, we first saw the hydro-electric power station. After that, as we moved forward there was a tribal settlement of the Malasars, ahead of which was a Ficatorium (exclusive nursery of *Ficus* species) of the Tamil Nadu Forest Department on the way. With a capacity of nurturing 2,000 saplings time, it grows saplings of 31 *Ficus* spp. from their cuttings collected from all over Nilgiris. But, at that point of time, there were only about 150 cuttings, and the saplings were under maintained.

### Meeting District Forest Officer of Pollachi

We were fortunate enough to get a chance to meet Mr. Devendra Kumar Meena, DFO and deputy director of Anamalai Tiger Reserve, Pollachi. On explaining to him about our mentorship project and our agenda of visiting him, he very kindly suggested to us to look at a forest patch along the road towards the Sarkarpathy Village from Sethumadai where the forest department is removing *Lantana*. He also connected us to Mr. Gnanabalmurugan, Range Officer of Pollachi, who further connected us to Forester Mr. Murugesan, who drove us all the way to the site from the Range office at Thatturpirivu.

### Visiting our potential restoration site

Accompanied by forester Mr. Murugesan, we reached the site. From there, forest watcher Mr. Jayaganesh took us into the patch and showed



Lesser Flameback. © M. Nishigandha.



Indian Giant Squirrel. © M. Nishigandha.



Sarkarpathy Power House. © M. Nishigandha.



Ficatorium of Tamil Nadu Forest Dept. © Srijita Pal.



DFO Office, Meenkarai road, Pollachi. © Srijita Pal.



The invasive species removal site. © Srijita Pal



Picture with Forester Mr. Murugesan and Forest watcher Mr. Jayaganesh. © Srijita Pal.

us around. He said the whole understorey was filled with *Lantana*, which the forest department is now removing. They have also marked the *Eucalyptus* trees to eventually remove them in the near future under TN-PIPER. We observed a lot of hoof marks, which we thought could be of cattle, but there were no traces of cattle dung. It was when we saw the pellets, we came to know that all the hoof marks were of wild ungulates. We documented a few native plants like *Pongamia pinnata*, *Ficus bellerica* as well as non-native trees like *Eucalyptus* and Tamarind that were there in the patch. Later, Mr. Jayaganesh and Mr. Murugesan informed us that seeds of some grass species have been sown in the *Lantana* removed area by the forest department. They asked us to contact forest official Mr. Vikram if we want to know more about it.

Perception Interviews at Sarkarpathy Village  
 In order to understand the landscape and people in the area, we went to have a conversation with local tribal people at Sarkarpathy. We first talked to some elders of the village, they said that they're a part of the Malasar tribe that majorly lives in Nagarouth historically. They moved down to Sarkarpathy to work as labourers in the Parambikulam-Aliyar water canal construction project in the 1960s and settled there. With all this, their dependence on forest products reduced, their livelihood shifted majorly to daily wage labour employed by the forest department.



They've also started receiving ration supplies from the Public Distribution System. Most of the elders said that, with time the forest has also changed a lot, it was denser with a better water availability. The people there do identify that plants like *Lantana camara*, *Senna spectabilis*, etc. which widespread in the forest in recent years with the increase in forest disturbances. They've also noticed that these plants are blocking the growth of other plant species that historically grow there. Also, we came to know that none of the families keep cattle, as that could attract interactions with tigers and other wild carnivores.



**Picture with Mr. Chandrasekar Rathnam. © Srijita Pal.**

### Meeting Mr. Vikram (forest official)

We met Mr. Vikram to know more about the plots, their plan of intervention and to obtain information about the grass species that were sown in the patch. He informed that seeds of 3 grass species *Cenchrus ciliaris*, *Cynodon dactylon*, and *Panicum dichotomiflorum* in the ratio of 3:1:1 respectively. He said that all these are palatable and drought resistant species. The seeds were collected in the month of October and were sown in November.



### Interaction with Mr. Chandrasekar Rathnam

One evening, we got to meet Mr. Chandrasekar Rathnam, wildlife photographer and co-founder of a Pollachi based NGO named 'Wild and Dark Earth'. He gave us valuable insights about the flora, fauna, people, and land use changes over the years in Sethumadai and surroundings. He also gave us a few contacts to network in the area for our purpose.



**Interviewing residents of Nagarouth. © M. Nishigandha.**

### Trek to Nagarouth and Engagement with the Malasars.

We went to the Nargarouth tribal village by following the water canal route. We traversed the route along the water canal coming from

Parambikulam and going to Aliyar which formed the boundary of the reserve forest. We passed through a lot of coconut, cacao, and areca plantations. This route is commonly used by elephants. We could see the signs of elephant presence including fresh elephant dung; telling that they have recently passed through.

Conversation with auto driver Mr. Ganesh revealed a lot of details about how the land has been through many transitions. Until the 2000s this buffer zone land was leased to the people for farming, crops such as groundnut, ragi, and other millets were harvested. Later, the land was declared as a reserved forest. Signs of earlier agricultural modification are visible and much of the area is dominated by invasive plant species. We started trekking from one point along the canal, accompanied by a local person to guide us through the forest. We spotted birds like, Asian Fairy Bluebird, Yellow-footed Green Pigeon, orioles, barbets, beaters and a few raptors, Malabar Giant Squirrel, etc.

Sarkarpathy, Old Sarkarpathy, and Nagaroth villages are connected with each other through this route and people often use motorcycles on these paths. It is a highly sensitive area in terms of elephant encounters. The village is located inside the forest. There we saw a shrine (stone deity) worshipped by the Malasar community. We also noticed a few concrete foundations built through government housing schemes for tribal people, situated in the middle of the forest. We interacted with a few people present in the village trying to understand their dependence on the forest, use of forest resources, changes they have seen in the forest over the years, vegetation, density, and their interactions with wildlife. It revealed that earlier they lived entirely inside the forest and depended on hunting for meat, tubers and honey for food, and trees-herbs for medicine.



In recent years their lifestyle has changed significantly. Most of them now work as daily wage laborers in farms around Sethumadai and with the forest department removing invasive species and doing small-scale agriculture inside the forest growing crops such as coffee, pepper, and banana. The government provides them with ration supplies, solar panels once every five years for each household, and concrete houses. However, construction of houses has stopped due to the lack of proper road access, making it difficult to transport building materials. The community expressed that they themselves want to shift out of the forest, as their dependency

on forest resources has reduced as access to livelihoods and medical facilities outside the forest is better. About three years ago, they requested land allotment to relocate outside the forest, but the request was denied.

We also noticed the spread of garbage and plastic waste inside the forest around the tribal settlement which was disheartening to see.

## Mapping our Restoration Site

We revisited the site, again accompanied by Mr. Jayaganesh. With all the understanding about the region and landscape that we developed in these few days, we decided to make our detailed project report on how to restore the forest patch that was suggested by the DFO. We mapped the project area that we selected. It is situated in the Ayiramgal beat of the Sethumadai west section, Pollachi range. We selected two plots, one as control plot (10.4872° N, 76.8613° E) and the other as the treatment plot (10.4877° N, 76.8616° E) each of 20 ha located on either sides of the Sarkarpathy road. The slopes extend east to north-eastward of the southern western ghat. The altitude varies between 300–400m.

## Visit to Parambikulam

One day, we went towards Parambikulam to look into the changing vegetation. It was all coconut and arecanut plantations at the foothills. As we started going uphill towards Parambikulam, both sides of the road were full of the invasive plant *Ageratina* and some *Lantana*. On the way, we spotted a Sambar Deer, many Spotted Deers, a Forest Owlet, Nilgiri Langurs, Indian Giant Squirrel, Wild Boars, etc. Also, there were many Bonnet Macaques near the Parambikulam Tiger Reserve; their wild behavior has now changed because of human interference. People often feed them food which seems to have altered their wild instincts and cling around the humans

who come for safari. The forest looked like it was just a teak plantation. Tall teak trees all around with *Lantana* and *Ageratina* in the understory with some mat grass at some patches. There were a few bamboo patches also but all of them were dead. The Parambikulam Reservoir and forest view from the high point gave us an idea of mosaics of the forest and dominant vegetation. We went there with the motive to find some patch with majorly native vegetation if not completely, but we failed.

## Conclusion

Our field observations showed that large parts of the area are highly disturbed due to plantations, spread of invasive species, and loss of native under storey vegetation. At the same time, signs of wildlife such as ungulate tracks, scats, and sightings of arboreal mammals indicated that the landscape is still being actively used by fauna and has the potential for recovery.

Interactions with forest department officials gave us insights into ongoing management activities like *Lantana* removal and grass seed sowing. Discussions with locals helped us understand long-term changes in land use and vegetation.

Conversations with the Malasar community were equally important, as they shared their experiences of how the forest structure, water availability, and plant diversity have changed over time. The trip highlighted the extent of invasive species inside the tiger reserve, how teak monocultures have altered the landscape in terms of vegetation, soil erosion, and faunal occupancy.

All these activities together helped us understand the landscape and come up with a detailed project report on an ecological restoration action plan for the selected plot in the foothills of the Anamalai range.

## Learning Outcomes

It was three months in the fellowship, we explored multiple theoretical and practical aspects of conservation. We had multiple field trips to various organizations working in the ecological restoration space. After all this exposure, this mentorship was our experimental ground where we had to integrate all our insights, learnings and knowledge that we gained through the course of fellowship.

- First thing we had to do was to coordinate with people, find contacts, and network with them to gain a clear and practical understanding of the ecological and social conditions of the Anamalai foothill landscape.
- These networks and multiple conversations with people around provided us with the basic information which compelled us into digging deeper and extracting relevant data that we needed in the planning of the restoration program.
- We had to interact with the government officials and other forest staff where only one of us knew the local language, this emphasized the team co-ordination and communication that is needed for a project to work smoothly.
- We visited multiple sites in the region and documented all our observations which helped to back up our conclusions in the DPR, this highlighted the importance of detailed written and photo documentation.
- The fact that we had to vacate our first accommodation in a very short notice in the middle of the mentorship helped us learn to tackle the unexpected situation and find a cost effective resolution.
- The mentorship exercise was kind of a reality check in terms of engaging with stakeholders, authorities, understanding



**Some fauna documented in Parambikulam (Calotes sp., Sambar Deer, Spotted Deer).**

landscape in the feasibility context, temporal requirement of restoration, and idea about all the different players who can control, alter or compliment the restoration initiative.

- It gave us an insight about how detailed and broad our baseline has to be to identify the monitoring indicators and to achieve the anticipated success while we are considering the area for restoration.
- It also helped us bring out our strengths and weaknesses with each other and compliment each other while working as a team for a common goal.



Nilgiri Langur. © M. Nishigandha.

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