

Project Update: June 2013

Lantana camara is an aggressive weed, which is reported invasive across much of the world, including southern India. Attempts to 'eradicate' it have been going on for almost a century with very limited success. The Shola Trust started has been working on trying to shift the objective from 'eradication' to 'adaptation' with the key focus being on getting local communities to find a use for lantana and use it as a resource.

The main objectives of this project funded by the RSG foundation were: (a) a conservation intervention - to work with local communities to experiment with making furniture in this region – a pilot in two villages; and (b) a research intervention - to work with forest department field staff to develop a protocol to monitor the spread of lantana on an ongoing basis.

The conservation intervention:

The first furniture training was with the people of the Moyar village, through the forest department constituted 'Eco Development Committee', in July 2012. Moyar is at the Western edge of the Mudumalai Tiger Reserve, and about 10 km from Masingudi, from the nearest town where people are likely to find employment. Accessibility to work, the support of the forest department and the interest shown by the villagers made us choose this village. Considerable cost for this training was provided by the Forest Department. Fifteen people took part in the training, with a mix of men and women, mostly middle aged.

The second lantana training was in the Manvayal village, at the central-southern edge of Mudumalai in January 2013. This was working in collaboration with the adivasi munnetra sangam, a local indigenous people's organisation. The trainees chosen by them this time were a group of unemployed youth, all about 18 years old, who had all been through some level of schooling, and did not want to work as agricultural labourers. This unit was completely independent of the Forest Department.

Both units are functioning now largely independent of The Shola Trust. For marketing the furniture, one of the key areas that the villages need external help with, we have been able to tie up with a person at the Army's Madras Regiment Centre who runs a 'home needs' centre. It is situated in Conoor, one of the closest town, and being a training centre there is a constant turnover of people, all of whom want simple affordable furniture. We hope this works out to be a successful partnership.

The research intervention:

There was a long delay in getting official research permits from the forest department (over a year), something that we have now learnt is the norm and needs to be factored into the planning. But given our relationship with the forest department, much of the work (interviewing forest department field staff) was completed even before the permits came though. A tentative map of the spread of lantana through the reserve was made in November 2012, and after the research permits came though this map is now being 'ground-truthed'. It is very close to completion, and we should be able to complete the

project very shortly.



