

DATA BANK ON
SACRED GROVES OF KERALA

Study sponsored by Kerala Forests & Wildlife Department
Study conducted by Institution of Foresters Kerala

Sacred Groves (SG) are considered as a cross section of the relics of the Evergreen forests, covered the State in the past. Sacred Groves are the abodes of many rare endemics including medicinal plants, reptiles, birds, small mammals, butterflies etc. Besides providing refuge to the biodiversity, the Sacred Groves played an important role in conserving and perpetuating many cultural traditions, deities, especially the 'Nagatharakal'. The famous *Theyyam* of north Malabar is performed in Sacred Groves. Traditionally a pond is also associated with the Sacred Groves.

Institution of Foresters Kerala (IFK) is a non-profit organization registered in 1987 (No.811/87) under the Travancore-Cochin Charitable Societies Act and is based at Thiruvananthapuram. This is an organisation consisting of only trained Foresters as members-both serving and retired. IFK has submitted a project for a comprehensive survey of Sacred Groves in Kerala in all the 14 districts and it was approved by the **KFDF-Research Committee** of Kerala Forests & Wildlife Department. To start with Thiruvananthapuram district was allotted. IFK commenced the study in November 2012 and submitted the final report to KFD in November 2013. Scientists who belonged to JNTGBRI Palode and KFRI helped in detailed study of flora.

Objectives of the study.

- (i) Location, Survey number, Village & Panchayath,
- (ii) Extent under vegetation and main plants in each SG,
- (iii) Detailed study of flora in selected SGs,
- (iv) Route to approach, longitudes & latitudes
- (v) Ownership & Legal status, address of custodian, Deity, Pooja schedule, festivals, threats, myths & legends, biodiversity etc
- (vi) Socio-economic and cultural aspects.

GPS mapping and Assigning Id number to each Sacred Grove taluk wise add to the uniqueness of this study.

Results of study in Thiruvananthapuram District .

During the Survey it is found that there are as many as **452** Sacred Groves in Thiruvananthapuram District as **against 39 to 150** recorded in earlier surveys reported by other Investigators (Individuals or those representing institutions).

Total number of Sacred Groves

Name of Taluk	Id number given	Number in each Taluk
Neyyattinkara	TV/NT/ 1 to 122	122
Thiruvananthapuram	TV/TV/ 1 to 101	101
Nedumangad	TV/ND/ 1 to 66	66
Chirayinkil	TV/CH/ 1 to 163	163
Total		452

Size of Sacred Groves in Trivandrum district

Sl No.	Size group	Numbers
1	SGs less than 10 Cents	182
2	SGs with area of 11 to 25 Cents	145
3	SGs with area of 26 to 50 Cents	96
4	SGs with area of 51 to 100 Cents	16
5	SGs with area more than 100 Cents	13
	Total	452 Nos. Area 113 Acres (45.6 Ha)

Largest Sacred Groves with respect to extent of area

Ralur kavu..... 3 acres (CH/28)

Sivgiri Madom..... 3 acres (CH/139)

Sakthipuram kavu..2.5 acres. * (ND/43)

* **Here female priest**-stays within the sacred grove

Owner ship details

Devaswam Board owned	16 Nos.
Trust owned	102 ,,
Private ownership	333 ,,
Government owned	1 ,,
Total	452 Nos.

Biodiversity

Composition of vegetation

- i. Species common to most of the SGs have been listed out- They are –Trees 32 , shrubs 25 and climbers 12
- ii. Species found to be important or rare have been listed giving location and pictures. They are 31 Tree species, 25 shrubs and 29 climbers.
- iii. There had been five very rare climbers located, namely:-
 - a. *Diploclisia glaucescens* showing guttation phenomenon
 - b. *Grewia palodensis* – newly identified by scientists of JNTBGRI Palode
 - c. *Cuscuta reflexa*- a twining parasitic climber that has no connection with ground,
 - d. *Dalbergia horrida* with very huge spines and tiny pinnate leaves.,
 - e. *Trichosanthes bracteatus* –very thick resembling a pole with attractive yellow flowers.

Some of the other rare plants located in the SGs are:-

Trees

Antiaris toxicaria, Alangium salvifolium, Borassus flabellifer, Calophyllum apetalum, Diospyros peregrina, Hopea ponga, Morinda citrifolia, Strychnos nux-vomica, etc.

Shrubs

Crotalaria spectabilis, Gloriosa superba, Memecylon depressum, Plumago zeylanica, Rauwolfia tetraphylla, Salacia fruticosa, Allophyluscobbe, etc.

Climbers

Artabostrys hexapetalus, Adenia hondala, Cuscuta reflexa, Dalbergia horrida, Diploclisia glaucescens, Grewia palodensis, Trichosanthes bracteatus etc.

Maximum rare species located in Pachallur Melekavu (TV/TV/12)

Photographs of the rare plants as seen in the sacred grove are also provided.

Social Dimensions related to Sacred Groves.

It is noted that interest among the people for protecting the Sacred Groves has increased very much. Trusts are also coming forward for protection. In the district alone, more than 700 people are engaged in the protection and conservation. In most of the cases custodians are sponsoring Priests for performing daily pooja . The study revealed that there is a strong net work of social system centred around Sacred Groves built on faith, customs, harmony, flow of income, conservation and on aesthetic ground.

Socio- Cultural aspects

This study has covered the belief entertained by devotees on various deities, the rituals performed during worship and different cultural programmes, folk lore and folk arts in festivals etc. The importance of Star Trees and their mythological relation with different deities being worshiped in SGs is also an informative part of this study.

Deity in Sacred Groves of Trivandrum District

Deity	Number of SGs	Remarks (Id number)
Ganapathy	1	CH/15
Hanuman	1	ND/45
Bhrama	1	CH/137
Annapoorneswari	1	NY/85
Sastha	9	NY/3, 14, 44, 72, 109, TV/12 , 31, 52, 63
Siva	7	NY/15, 24, TV/32, TV/53/TV, ND/42, 43 & CH/132
Vishnu	3	NY/57, TV/38, ND/42
Madan thampuran	10	NY/61, 63, 70,75, 82, 121, TV/1, 94, ND/2, 28
Bhoothathan/Ganapathy/Nagar	2	TV/31, CH/121
Deity—No pooja	1	CH/163 (Govt.owned)
No deity---Only lighting lamp	8	NY/42, 111, ND/6, 7, 29, 47, 66, CH/46
No deity/ No pooja	2	NY/122, TV/92
Nagar/Devi	406	Rest all

Progress of ongoing study on SGs of other districts.

The study on the Sacred Groves of Kozhikode, Thrissur , and Kollam Districts are nearing completion. **Study in Alappuzha district has been just commenced.** Result of the study conducted so far in the above three districts shows:-

Name of District	Sacred Groves covered so far	Additional number anticipated	Total number anticipated
Kozhikode	1100 Nos.	700 Nos.	1800 Nos.
Thrissur	450 Nos.	250 Nos.	700 Nos.
Kollam	585 Nos.	200 Nos.	785 Nos.