

History

The international city of Auroville was founded in 1968 and Pitchandikulam is one of its communities. Around 200 years ago the Auroville Plateau was covered in scrub jungle and herds of elephants roamed the area. During the 1820s trees were felled to drive away the tigers. The last remaining forests were cut down in the 1950s for timber to make boats. Today the indigenous vegetation of the area, the Tropical Dry Evergreen Forest (TDEF), is only found in isolated reserve forest patches and in small remnant sacred groves around temples. It is one of the rarest ecosystems in India. Pitchandikulam is an area of 70 acres within the green belt of Auroville. The first Aurovillian settlers found the land dry and desolate; prior to 1973 only a few scattered palm trees were found in the area and the traditional dryland farming of peanuts and pulses had degraded the soil leaving deep eroded gullies. In that year, restoration processes were set in motion using green manures to rebuild the soil. Live fences were created to protect the land from goats and cows, and pioneer species of acacia, leucaena, gliricidia, and eucalyptus were planted to provide windbreaks and shade. At the same time seeds and other plant materials were introduced from nearby remnant patches of the almost extinct Tropical Dry Evergreen Forest, and nurseries were set up - these have been an essential focus of the Pitchandikulam community ever since. In the same year the first well was dug at Pitchandikulam and a bullock cart was used to water the young trees. Now Pitchandikulam is a peaceful sanctuary of self-generating forest with a wide diversity of flora and fauna. More than 800 species of plants can be found in the sanctuary forest, grasslands and ethno-medicinal gardens. There has always been a strong emphasis on conservation of indigenous plant species with a particular focus on medicinal plants and the people who use them. In 1993 Pitchandikulam Forest became part of a national Medicinal Plant Conservation Network, co-ordinated by the Foundation for Revitalisation of Local Health Traditions (FRLHT) in Bangalore. Collaborating with 30 other in-situ and ex-situ conservation areas, detailed programs of botanical and social documentation, conservation and planting initiatives have been developed. Through community outreach activities and delivering innovative education methods in the schools of the bioregion, Pitchandikulam Forest provides models of sustainable ecological practices. Traditional knowledge and technologies of the local people are being documented, displayed and woven into the Pitchandikulam landscape. A team of botanists and community activists work from Pitchandikulam on several projects to restore the indigenous forest and the traditional knowledge related to the local ecosystem.