

DECCAN HERALD



Visitors at a sandalwood products exhibition organised at the Indian Institute of Science in Bangalore on Wednesday.
DH PHOTO

State losing sandalwood trees to smuggling, handicrafts

BANGALORE, DHNS: Karnataka may lose its reputation as the Land of Sandalwood. For, the number of sandalwood trees has reduced over the years.

Smuggling and increasing demand for sandalwood for handicrafts are the main reasons, experts and Forest department officials said. The decrease in sandalwood trees has led to rise in sale of fake wood, they said at the two-day international seminar on "Sandalwood: Current Trends and Future Prospects", organised by the Indian Council of Forestry, Research and Education and the Institute of Wood Science and Technology (IWST).

Octogenarian sandalwood researcher R A Srimathi said the demand for sandalwood handicrafts and smuggling was equally responsible for the fall in the number of trees. Over the years, the tree girth had also reduced drastically. Earlier, the diameter was not less than 60cm; now finding one with a 30cm girth is also difficult. There are no more old trees left. All have been smuggled or felled for commercial use.

Exploitation by the government departments for gifting and stocking them is another cause, she added.

Srimathi, who is working on the history of sandalwood, its use in temples and for religious purposes, said she was search-

ing for trees which yielded six per cent oil, instead of those that yield hardly three per cent.

Srimathi was felicitated for her contribution to research on sandalwood since 1960 and her study on "Chemical Control of Spike Diseases and Unique Techniques."

IWST Director V Ramakantha said sandalwood plantations in private areas had not increased due to lack of awareness. IWST is working with farmers, training them to grow other tree species along with sandalwood, so that farmers have alternate crops, while sandalwood trees are preserved and the area under sandalwood cultivation increases. The agroforestry model is being adopted to increase sandalwood trees, he added.

Governor H R Bhardwaj said that while sandalwood should be used for handicrafts, the government should draw a line on how much to use and preserve.

Union Minister for Environment and Forests Veerappa Moily proposed the nationalisation of sandalwood and giving it the status of 'royal tree'. He said he would write to Chief Minister Siddaramaiah and the Karnataka forest minister suggesting that all government offices, guesthouses and homes have sandalwood trees, as it was part of the State's cultural heritage and the pride of Kannadigas.