

Shri. S. K. DAS., I.F.S.,
Principal Chief Conservator of Forests.

Sub: - CFM - Tending of Seethaphal trees in VSS areas - Regarding.

Anona squamosa, the custard apple, popularly called Seethaphal is predominant NTFP species available mostly in the degraded forests of the State especially in drier districts like Rangareddy, Medak, Nizamabad, Nalgonda, Mahabubnagar, Kurnool, Kadapa, Chittoor etc. this species grows in some pockets even in the moister districts like East Godavari, West Godavari, Visakhapatnam etc. It is a native of tropical South America and the West Indies, but has become naturalized in this country through extensive cultivation for the sake of its edible fruit. It is available in wild, particularly near old inhabited sites, in several parts of central and western India and in the Deccan Peninsula.

This species yields high value delicious and nutritive fruit which is much relished for its flavour and tasty custard available within. This fruit is a major NTFP product in the drier tracts fetching substantial revenue to the VSSs. Some of the VSSs earn a couple of lakhs of rupees from the sale of this fruit. In addition the VSS members and their families enjoy consumption of this fruit for its nutritive value.

Over the years, our experience has been that the production of the fruit in the forests is slowly dwindling due to improper management of the forests and the prevailing drought conditions recurring year after year. Because of the prevailing poor soil moisture conditions, the fruits often do not attain big size resulting in reduction in the sale and nutritive value of the fruit. During acute drought years the trees although yield a number of fruits, most of them end up drying on the branches itself.

While the department is encouraging plantations of custard apple in large areas with improved high yielding varieties with short gestation grafted seedlings, hardly anything is done to improve the health of the naturally existing trees in the forests to improve the production and quality of these fruits.

It is a matter of common knowledge that custard apple trees growing in depressions, along the nalas and along the farmers' field bunds with good moisture conditions grow greener, richer and yield more fruit in comparison to the trees that look unhealthy, etiolated with yellow leaves growing in areas under moisture stress conditions.

Under the APCFM project under the treatment components "Improvement of degraded forests", "Rehabilitation of degraded non-teak miscellaneous hardwood forests", in which forests the custard apple trees occur predominantly, there is a provision for Silvicultural prescriptions for promotion of desirable NTFPs with adoption of suitable Silvicultural practices and soil cultivation. With slight Silvicultural interventions and soil working to these custard apple trees, the production and quality of the fruits in the VSS areas can be considerably enhanced. The possible Silvicultural interventions

could be clearing of the thorny weeds around the custard apple trees to avoid congestion and competition from these weeds.

Formation of a deep semi lunar trench at the bases of the plants by digging the soil may be a foot deep and a foot wide and heaping the soil so obtained at the base of the stems will help improving the soil moisture regime. Where the trees grow on slopes, semi lunar trench may be formed on the lower slopes for the water accumulation during rains which improves the soil moisture regime. Application of manure preferably vermi compost will improve the fertility of the soil. These operations will boost up production of quality fruits with bigger eyes and copious custard within the fruits. The increased production and quality of fruits will increase the revenue of the VSSs. Further, the villagers and their children also improve their health due to the consumption of more nutritive fruits.

I am sure you will appreciate the need to tend these naturally growing custard apple trees, improve the productivity of the degraded forests, and increase the income levels of the VSSs, thus ameliorating living conditions of the poor.

This operation may go as one of the FSR items, so that the field officers do not lose sight of this important operation in forest treatment.

Sd/- **(S.K. Das),**
Principal Chief Conservator of Forests