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Stress on conserving medicinal plants

CHENNAI: Increasing pressure on natural habitats and a rapidly expanding world market for traditional medicines has prompted over 240 of India's botanists, biotechnologists and pharmacologists to meet with colleagues from overseas to discuss how to conserve, cultivate and validate the country's diversity of medicinal plants.

India has an estimated 47,000 plant species, about 8,000 of which are being used in traditional medicine.

According to the WHO the world market for traditional medicines is worth over \$60 billion and expanding at roughly 20 per cent a year. But India has captured only 2 per cent of that market because traditional medicines are not backed by scientific research to establish the safety, efficacy and quality standards.

"We need to study medicinal plants because the knowledge already gained will be soon be lost... and new molecular models maybe valuable," said Professor S. Madhavan, a biochemist at the University of Nebraska, Lincoln, United States his keynote address at Pachaiyappa's College on Thursday, who highlighted research going on into foods such as the pungent capsicum and cranberry in the US.

"It is time that traditional medicine and herbal drugs are subjected to the same rigorous testing long applied to modern medicine," said MJ Nanjan, Director, TIFACCORE, JSS College of Pharmacy, Ootacamund in his lead lecture. But, he also stressed, scientists must attempt to investigate the synergy of a plant as a biological system, which can make it more effective than the sum of its molecular parts.

The International Conference on Medicinal Plants and Herbal Drugs: Challenges and Opportunities in Cultivation, Sustainable Utilisation and Conservation will continue until March 6.

Recommendations based on the deliberations will be submitted to the National Medicinal Plants Board, Ministry of Health and Family Welfare.

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Marginal increase in forest cover in State

CHENNAI: There has been a marginal increase in the forest cover in the State, according to a report released by the Forest Survey of India (FSI) recently.

As per the data the increase has been recorded as 24 square km of forests of different types. The study by the FSI officials revealed that the increase in forest cover was achieved mainly due to afforestation successfully carried out in the State by the Forest Department.

The forest cover had increased in Ariyalur, Kancheepuram, Madurai, Nagapattinam, Pudukottai, Thanjavur, Tirunelveli and Villupuram districts, the report said. As per the FSI data Very Dense Forest in the State had increased by a square km; the Moderately Dense Forest Cover had increased by 27 square km. However, the Open Forest Cover had decreased by four square km due to which it was declared that there was an increase of 24 square km in the overall forest cover in the State. The FSI report said that the increase in the forest cover was arrived at after comparing the satellite data which covered the period from January 2006 to May 2007 with the earlier data that covered the period from December 2004 to February 2005. In terms of forest canopy density classes, the report said the State has 2,926 square km of Very Dense Forest; 10,216 square km of Moderately Dense Forest and 10,196 square km of Open Forests. The report also said the recorded forest area in the State was 22,877 square km, which constituted 17.59 per cent of the geographical area of the State. Reserved Forests comprised 84.75 per cent, Protected Forests 9.54 per cent and Unclassified Forests 5.71 per cent of the total forest area.

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Prize catch for Cuddalore fishermen



One of the whale sharks caught in Cuddalore on Thursday.

CUDDALORE: Fishermen of the Cuddalore Old Town area got prize catch in the form of whale sharks on Thursday.

Two such sharks were caught in their nets off the port area in the early hours of Thursday, while two others broke loose by snapping the nets.

The trawlers had gone for deep-sea fishing, the fishermen said, adding that they caught the whale sharks after a couple of years.

400 to 500 kg Each shark weighed 400 to 500 kg and took 15 fishermen to be loaded on to a truck.

The fishermen jettisoned other smaller catches to make room for the prize catch in the trawlers.

Whale sharks are locally known as “paal sura.” They are sought for the medicinal properties of their fins, sources said.

Officials of the Fisheries Department said that whale sharks were found off the Cuddalore coast, but rarely caught in nets.

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Call to address bio-safety concern of genetically modified crops

Emergence of more virulent forms of pests and pathogens is also an important concern

CUDDALORE: Biotechnology cannot be a panacea for the problems confronting the agricultural sector. At the most it can be part of a solution, but, thus far it is being pushed in the wrong direction, said B.Vasantraj David, a leading pesticides scientist.

Biotechnology is being touted as the successor to chemicals as a miracle technology, a quick fix, rather than an integral part of a shift to sustainable agriculture. Mr. David was delivering a special address at the national workshop on “Paradigm shifts in research on crop resistance to pests” organised by the Department of Entomology of the Faculty of Agriculture, Annamalai University, at Chidambaram on Thursday.

He said that the transgenic crops, however, had not found ready acceptance among the people at large. Biosafety concerns were the major reasons for non-adoption of transgenic crops in most countries.

Mr. David, former national president of the Pesticides Association of India who has authored several books on pesticides, said that these concerns included transgene movement to other varieties and wild relatives leading to possible development of super weeds, erosion of genetic diversity and ecological disturbances.

Similarly, there was widespread apprehension that transgene products could be toxic or allergenic to humans and animals. Also transgenic crops—pest resistant varieties—could have adverse impact on non-target organisms.

Emergence of more virulent forms of pests and pathogens was also an important concern. He pointed out that already some insect populations, e.g., diamondback moth, had become resistant to the Bt toxin after prolonged exposure. It meant that Bt would no longer be effective in controlling a particular pest population.

Therefore, Mr. David who is currently president of the Sun Agro Biosystems Ltd, Chennai, said the traits to be altered and strategies to be adopted should be carefully considered to minimise the biosafety risks.

He emphatically said that the transgenic crops should not be viewed in isolation, but, should form part of the overall national agricultural policy. It was imperative to prioritise the crops and traits to be engineered and strategies to be adopted, Mr. David added.

P. Narayanasamy, Dean, Faculty of Agriculture, laid stress on increased productivity and reduced pesticide usage. The brinjal variety “Annamalai” released by the faculty was extensively grown in the State. He called upon the farm scientists to address the issues arising out of the proposed commercial usage of Bt. brinjal.

J.S.Bentur, Principal Scientist from the Directorate of Rice Research, Hyderabad, D. Sundara Raju of the National Bureau of Agriculturally Important Insects, Bangalore, K.S. Mohan of the Monsanto Research Centre, Bangalore, B. Singaravelu of the Sugarcane Breeding Institute, Coimbatore, and others participated.

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Traders seek exemption for food grains from GST

MADURAI: Tamil Nadu Foodgrains Merchants Association has called for exemption of all food grains from taxes when the Good and Services Tax (GST) comes to force in the State. A memorandum containing various demands was submitted to S.N.M. Ubayadullah, Commercial Taxes Minister, and K. Anbalagan, Finance Minister, during a pre-budget consultative meeting held in Chennai on Monday.

Pepper and cumin powders should also be exempted from taxes in the upcoming State Budget for the financial year 2010-11. The 4 per cent levy on cotton seeds should also be removed, S.P. Jeyapragasam, association president, said.

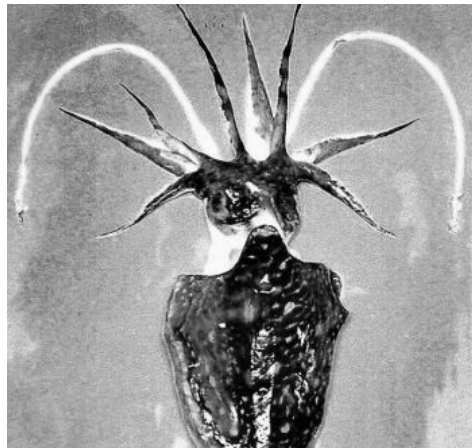
He called for granting general exemption to dhal and oil instead of conditional exemption. While the Central Government had granted exemption for pickle from excise duty, a 4 per cent value added tax (VAT) was levied in the State. This should be removed, he said.

Pointing out that the Centre had granted clearance to import sugar, a commodity in which a shortfall was seen in the country, the association called for abolition of the 4 per cent VAT on imported sugar in the State

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New species of cuttlefish found



New find:The new species of cuttlefish found by FCRI scientists.

Tuticorin: A new species of cuttlefish, which belongs to the genus of *sepia vecchioni*, has been discovered recently by the Fisheries College and Research Institute (FCRI).

It was spotted along the coastal area of Colachel in Kanyakumari district by FCRI scientists while carrying out an intensive research on cephalopod taxonomy. This species had been misconstrued as *sepia prashadi* so far, Dr. Venkataramani, Dean of the college, told The Hindu here on Tuesday.

With this species, the number of cuttlefish species recorded in the Indian seas has gone up to 15. Referring to the etymology of the new species, Dr. Venkataramani said it was named after Dr. Michael Vecchione, a renowned cephalopod taxonomist. So it has been identified as patronymic species. "The *sepia vecchioni* has distinguished features of transverse zebra type white stripes facing upwards in the dorsal mantle of the body, four median suckers, three rows of biserial normal suckers and the arms are elongated whip like. They are fragile and elliptically oval shaped. It also shows a clear cut sexual dimorphism and in cuttlebone characteristics," he said.

The scientists of FCRI would make an in-depth study on the biological status and stock assessment of the new species in the Gulf of Mannar, South East Coast of India, he added. During 2003, scientists found two new species of cuttlefish along Tuticorin coast and christened them 'sepia prabahari' and 'sepia ramani.'

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Tea Board to launch logo

Udhagamandalam: The Nilgiris Orthodox Logo will be launched by the Tea Board shortly, according to Tea Board Executive Director R.D. Nazeem.

Speaking to The Hindu here on Thursday, he said that since the geographical indicator registry was being prepared, producers of orthodox tea in the corporate, cooperative and bought-leaf sectors, who are interested in using the logo and the name, have been asked to submit their applications without delay.

To a question, Mr. Nazeem said that till a couple of decades ago the Nilgiris district was renowned for its orthodox tea. Unfortunately due to the growing preference for cut, tear and curl (CTC) teas in the domestic market, many of the manufacturers had changed their processing methods.

As a result, now only 15 per cent of the factories in South India are manufacturing orthodox tea.

This has created problems even on the export front as many of the countries, excluding the Sub-continent, Egypt and the United Kingdom, relish orthodox teas, especially those produced in the Nilgiris which are known for their colour and aromatic flavour.

By way of encouraging the orthodox tea manufacturers the Tea Board has for the last three years been extending a subsidy of Rs. 2 to 3 per kilogram.

A Quality Committee will be formed with the help of the Nilgiri Planters Association (NPA) to decide on the parameters that would have to be complied with by the manufacturers, brokers and packeteers for the use of the logo and the name.

They should adhere to Prevention of Food Adulteration standards and should not fail chemical and colour tests.

Over the next two months officers of the Tea Board will be visiting factories, warehouses, blending units, export houses etc. to draw samples.

Hereafter, the exercise will be carried out at least twice a year.

Stating that only those factories which use the best quality leaves will be eligible to use the logo,

Mr. Nazeem pointed out that even in Darjeeling only sixty producers have been permitted to use the Darjeeling logo. Misuse of the Nilgiri logo will be viewed very seriously.

Food inflation rises to 17.87%

TNN, Mar 5, 2010, 01.09am IST

NEW DELHI: Food inflation rose marginally to 17.87% for the week ended February 20 on the back of higher prices of milk, wheat, rice and vegetables. The figure in the previous week was at 17.58%. On an annual basis, price of rice increased 10%, wheat 14%, pulses 35%, onions 11% and potatoes 28%.

Inflation in fuel, power light and lubricant group was 9.59%, slightly lower than 9.89% in the previous week. However, it is expected to surge significantly next week when the impact of the fuel price hike would be reflected in the index.

The Budget last week raised customs duty on petrol and diesel to 7.5% from 2.5%, while excise duty was raised by Re 1 on non-branded (normal) petrol and diesel. This saw the oil companies immediately hike prices. Beginning February 27, petrol prices rose by Rs 2.67 a litre and diesel by Rs 2.58 per litre in Delhi.

FM Pranab Mukherjee on Wednesday had blamed the multi-level supply chain system for stoking prices of food articles in the country. "Particularly with regards to food, I do agree that the cost of intermediation is very high from farm gate to the wholesale markets and from wholesale markets to retail markets," he had said.

"And how to reduce the cost of intermediation is one of the terms of reference of the PM-appointed core committee of chief ministers, in which the agriculture minister and Planning Commission deputy chairman and I are members," Mukherjee had said.

The cost of intermediation is abnormally high, he said, and admitted that perhaps it requires more competition. One way to increase competition is to improve the distribution channels, and set up physical infrastructure for post-harvest storage, he said.

During the week, the price of milk rose by 1% and fish by 3%, while prices of fruits and vegetables, gram and barley eased by 3% each. At the same time, tea, wheat, eggs and arhar became cheaper by 1% each. But the non-food articles group rose by 0.1% on account of higher prices of raw jute and raw rubber by 4% each.



Petro price hike joint decision: Pawar

Friday , Mar 05, 2010 at 0838 hrs



"He (the Finance Minister) had to take such a step (hike customs and excise duty on petroleum products) to raise the resources. We (allies) are all party to it," Pawar told reporters on the sidelines of the annual Krishi Mela, organised by the Indian Agricultural Research Institute, here on Thursday.

Under fire from opposition parties for rising food prices in the country, the Agriculture Minister said it was a tough job for him to get remunerative price for farmers while keeping consumers happy over the prices. "The government has two main duties. One is to give better price to farmers and the other is to supply foodgrains at reasonable rates to the poor. It is very difficult to strike a balance, as there is a section in the population which starts complaining that prices have risen," he said, addressing the farmers.

Lauding the farmers for braving the drought, Pawar sought to generate support for the government's nutrient-based subsidy regime, decontrolling fertiliser sector from government pricing while hiking the prices for urea by asking them to engage in balanced use of fertilisers based on the soil need.

He tried to placate the farmers by saying the government would be now extending the farm credit at a rate of 5 per cent for the farmers making regular repayment.

Later, speaking to the reporters, Pawar said any proposal to export foodgrains would be taken by the Empowered Group of Ministers headed by Finance Minister Pranab Mukherjee.