

**Doon Watch Nature Series for Dehradun Live Hindustan Times
by Sanjay Sondhi**

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Safeda-the Eucalyptus tree

A stroll down any of the major roads in Dehradun in the last month or so, be it Rajpur, Chakrata or even Sahastradhara road has often revealed a “white carpet” of flowers. Each time a vehicle callously drives past these flowers, they get swept along the road. As they roll by, in the vehicle's wake, some tragically, get crushed by other vehicles following, while others attempt to dodge the onrushing traffic. Standing under one of these trees on the road is a joy (don't let your joy be short-lived-beware the metal monsters that might just you run over!)-the flowers flutter down, while white caps, which cover the flowers, fall onto the metaled road surface with a peculiar clicking sound.

For those of you who haven't guessed already, I am referring to the Eucalyptus tree. These tall trees, with their smooth greyish-white bark (hence their name-*Safeda*) dot Dehradun's landscape. Very interestingly, the flowers of the Eucalyptus are insignificant and have no petals. The whitish coloured “flowers” that you see on the road are actually the stamens of the flower. The name Eucalyptus actually means “*eu*=well” and “*kalyptos*=covered” in Greek, referring to the white cap that covers the flowers of the tree. As children, piling up these caps, one on top of another, to make tall columns, provided us free, wholesome entertainment in the the lap of nature!

The Eucalyptus tree is not native to India. Most species of Eucalyptus are Australian, but they have spread to most parts of the world. Despite not being indigenous, the tree has its uses. It is hardy, grows quickly, and birds love the nectar its flowers provide. Whenever the tree flowers, a host of nectar and fruit eating birds gather to feast on the tree. Parakeets, bulbuls, sunbirds and white-eyes forage on the tree in large numbers.

The next time you pass by a Eucalyptus tree , pick up its dry leaf and crush it. There is very little fragrance in the dried leaves. Next, pick up a fallen fresh leaf and crush it. A pungent fragrance rushes up your nostrils. The smell comes from Eucalyptus oil, which is present in the leaves. This oil has commercial value and is often used as a decongestant for the common cold. This very oil also repels herbivores, so cattle normally do not eat its leaves.

The presence of Eucalyptus plantations throughout India is a bit of a mixed bag. On the one hand, the trees grow quickly and its wood has commercial value. On the other hand, they are not native to India, and are often considered invasive. In addition, the tree is known to be a “water sucker”. In fact, in some countries they are used to drain swamps. In India, a significant concern raised by plantations of Eucalyptus is that



they are believed to lower the water table significantly. There are so many actions that man takes today, thoughtlessly, without being entirely clear of the long term benefits or harmful effects (including the mass plantations of Eucalyptus!) that it makes one wonder-are we really the most intelligent species on earth!

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Making a difference: 22 March, 2010 was World Water Day. The world faces a serious water crisis, but our daily actions can make a difference. Don't let the water run when you brush your teeth or wash your dishes. Use a bucket of water, instead of running water to wash your vehicle or have a bath....make every drop count.