

To

Shri. Prakash Javdekar  
Minister of Environment, Forests and Climate Change  
Government of India  
17<sup>th</sup> April 2020

Subject: Letter number F. No. 8-32/2020 WL titled 'Advisory regarding the containing and management of COVID-19 in National Parks/Sanctuaries/ Tiger Reserves' dated 6<sup>th</sup> April 2020.

Dear Sir

We are writing to you regarding the advisory issued by your ministry as stated in the subject, which states that immediate preventive measures are to be taken to stop the transmission and spread of the virus from humans to animals and vice-versa. It states that Chief Wildlife Wardens of all states and union territories are to ensure reduction in human wildlife interface through restriction of movement of people to National Parks/Sanctuaries/ Tiger Reserves. It also states that, the movement of staff, tourists and villagers in and around Protected Areas is to be screened under the stipulations of the Union Health Ministry.

We are in complete agreement with the fact that our rich animal diversity needs to be especially protected from the COVID-19 pandemic. We also support the restrictions on movement of tourists into the protected areas; which we presume is anyway being followed due to the nation-wide lockdown.

We are particularly concerned that the advisory seeks a reduction in human wildlife interface and restriction in the movement of villagers inside and around protected areas. As you are well aware, there are currently about 3 to 4 million people living inside protected areas, and many more in the immediate surrounding. These are mostly Scheduled Tribes and others including Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups, nomadic and pastoralist communities, fish workers etc. They are dependent on the natural resources within and around the protected areas for their daily livelihoods.

As you are well aware, these scheduled tribes and other local communities are among the most vulnerable in our society. While the rights of Scheduled Tribes and other traditional communities living in and around forest areas have been recognised and protected under the Scheduled Tribes and Other Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006; the implementation of the FRA in recognition and vesting of rights to communities remains abysmal<sup>1</sup>. There are already reports to show that the nation-wide lockdown has affected the livelihoods and survival of tribal and other households as they are unable to collect and sell forest produce in this summer season<sup>2</sup>. **We fear that there is great danger of this advisory being misunderstood and misused to further alienate and restrict access of these communities to the natural resources that they are dependent on for their lives and**

---

<sup>1</sup><https://www.iccaconsortium.org/index.php/2018/03/16/relocation-from-protected-areas-violation-of-the-constitution-wildlife-protection-act-and-the-forest-rights-act-in-india/>;

<https://www.un.org/development/desa/indigenouseoples/wp-content/uploads/sites/19/2019/01/Summary-Final-Implementation-of-FRA-in-PAs.-Final-14.11.2017-as-printed.pdf>

<sup>2</sup>[https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/other-states/lockdown-halts-harvesting-season-in-forests/article31253235.ece?utm\\_campaign=article\\_share&utm\\_medium=referral&utm\\_source=whatsapp.com](https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/other-states/lockdown-halts-harvesting-season-in-forests/article31253235.ece?utm_campaign=article_share&utm_medium=referral&utm_source=whatsapp.com)

**livelihoods. In fact going by the news reports this has indeed started happening.** A news article from Rajaji National Park reported that a critical zone has been declared, surrounding 30 kms of the park and there is complete restriction of movement of the local Van Gujjars to access the park due to this advisory. Furthermore, several quintals of milk that the Van Gujjars sell in diaries in Haridwar was overturned and destroyed by the forest department in a bid to prevent the Van Gujjars from reaching the cities<sup>3</sup>. In Kinwat taluka of Nanded District in Maharashtra, an elderly man from the Kolam PVTG group has been thrashed by the local forest department officials for going into the forest to collect bamboo<sup>4</sup>. On 6<sup>th</sup> of April the huts and fields of Kokana, Warli and Bhil tribal communities were torched by the forest department officials in Gujarat.<sup>5</sup> Given the insecurity that they already face on a daily basis with access to resources because of non-recognition of their rights and additional impacts because of the lock down, the Ministry's advisory has put these communities in a seriously precarious situation.

As you may also be aware, reports are coming in from different regions where these communities have acted responsibly and on their own accord to self-isolate themselves from this pandemic<sup>6</sup>. In fact, district wise spread of Covid-19 data in Maharashtra suggests that there are no or negligible cases reported from forested and tribal dominated districts of the state.

We would also like to state that **there is absolutely no evidence so far of humans beings being able to infect free-ranging wild animals.** The only reported case is of a captive tiger which is housed in a restricted area and exposed to fairly close contact to humans, both of these conditions do not apply to our protected areas. In fact all available evidence suggests that this virus doesn't very efficiently transfer into animals.

**In light of the above we urge you to immediately reissue the advisory with clarifications that:**

- **The advisory should not be implemented to restrict customary and legal rights of use and access of the local communities living in and around Protected Areas.**
- **Forest and Revenue departments must ensure that no villagers are restricted or evicted from protected areas during this time.**
- **State governments must provide free rations and items that people in and around protected areas need for their day to day survival which in current times is difficult to access.**
- **All reports of atrocities, restrictions and eviction of people during these times are to be dealt with immediately and strict action against the perpetrators is to be taken.**

---

<sup>3</sup> Reported in Amar Ujala on the 8<sup>th</sup> of April, 2020.

<sup>4</sup> Reported by Amit Kulkarni from Nanded, Maharashtra

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.downtoearth.org.in/news/environment/covid-19-gujarat-forest-dept-officials-allegedly-torched-huts-fields-70426>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.thehindubusinessline.com/news/spirited-fight-tribals-villagers-go-into-self-isolation-to-ward-off-coronavirus-threat/articles31164506.ece>; <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/coronavirus-india-news-tribals-in-chattisgarhs-bastar-make-masks-from-palm-leaves-stay-in-to-fight-2201143?amp=1&akamai-rum=off#referrer=https://google.com>

Health guidelines that are periodically issued by Indian Council of Medical Research should be followed by everyone to ensure that the pandemic is controlled. That would be the most effective way of keeping our protected areas safe.

We trust that you will do the needful.

Thanking you in anticipation,

Meenal Tatpati, Neema Pathak Broome, Ashish Kothari and Shruti Ajit, Kalpavriksh, Pune  
Tushar Dash, Independent Researcher

Dr Ravi Chellam

Dr Nitin Rai, Ashoka Trust for Research in Ecology and the Environment (ATREE)

Dr Sharachchandra Lele, ATREE

Dr Shruti Mokashi, ATREE

Dr Atul Joshi, ATREE

Roshni Kutty, ATREE

Shomona Khanna, Advocate, Supreme Court of India

Purnima Upadhyay, KHOJ Melghat

Dr Madhu Ramnath

Vena Kapoor, Nature Conservation Foundation

Arpita Kodiveri, Environmental Lawyer and Legal Researcher

Indu Netam, Adiwasi Jan Van Adhikar Manch, Chhattisgarh

Dr. Kishor Moghe, Gramin Samassya Mukti Trust, Yavatmal

Remish Ekka, Adivasi Navjeevan gathan Navjyoti Agua (ANGNA)

Aruna Rodrigues

Nayana Udayashankar, EQUATIONS (Equitable Tourism Options)

Walter Mendoza

R Shreedhar, Environics Trust

Ashok Chowdhury, All India Union of Forest Working People (AIUFWP)

Aman Singh, Krishi Avam Paristhitiiki Vikas Sansthan (KRAPAVIS)

Salam Rajesh, Manipur Nature Society

Benipuri Goswami, Chhattisgarh Van Adhikar Manch

Leo Saldanha, Environment Support Group

Tarun Joshi, Van Panchayat Sangharsh Morcha, Uttrakhand

Soumitra Ghosh, Pravin Mote, Nishant Mate, Devjit Nandi, Souparna Lahiri All India Forum of Forest Movements (AIFFM)

Nandita Hazarika, Ecosystems-India

Sharmishta Bose, Oxfam India

Sushmita Verma, Independent Researcher

Ranjan Panda, Water Initiatives

Contact for further communication: [meenaltatpati01@gmail.com](mailto:meenaltatpati01@gmail.com) and [neema.pb@gmail.com](mailto:neema.pb@gmail.com)

CC to:

1. Shri Arjun Munda, Minister of Tribal Affairs