

:: PRESS STATEMENT ::

January 22, 2008

**‘FUTURE OF CONSERVATION NETWORK’ WELCOMES PM’S STRESS ON
WILDLIFE CONSERVATION UNDER THE FOREST RIGHTS ACT
&
URGES GOVERNMENT TO CONSIDER A DEMOCRATIC AND KNOWLEDGE-
BASED APPROACH TO CRITICAL WILDLIFE HABITATS**

As conservation and human rights organizations collaborating on the ‘Future of Conservation Network (FoC)’, **we welcome the Prime Minister, Dr Manmohan Singh’s letter to all Chief Ministers of States¹ stressing that adequate protection be given to Critical Wildlife Habitats** while implementing the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act 2006 (STOTFDA).

However, we are concerned that the **MoEF’s ‘Guidelines on Critical Wildlife Habitats (CWH)’ issued in November 2007, do not adequately provide for a systematic, scientific and democratic process.** The criteria for identification of CWH are ambiguous and scientifically questionable, and consultations with local communities in several aspects of the process are only optional. We are also seriously concerned that many state governments are rushing to identify and notify CWH without due scientific and democratic processes. Already there is information that this is causing conflict and tension amongst communities, leading to situations that will rebound on conservation. We have already sent detailed comments on this to MoEF.

In this regard, several of the undersigned organisations as part of the **FoC Network, have prepared guidelines for the identification and establishment of CWH, through sound modern and traditional knowledge and a fully democratic process.** Some key steps in these guidelines are:

- When identifying CWH, it is important to note that a mix of approaches is needed to secure wildlife and ecosystems in India, including areas of no-use, minimal-use and multiple-use.
- The size of each part of the CWH, including inviolate areas if any, must be based on ecological, biological and landscape ecology principles. The decision should also consider what is feasible given various socioeconomic factors, including (but not only) if the number of *bona fide* rights holders affected is large or the human communities involved are particularly vulnerable.
- The process for establishing a CWH at a state level should be participatory from the time of identification and planning to implementation. It should involve national/state/local experts, representatives of traditional long-resident and user communities, and government staff, and be fully transparent. Sanctuary Advisory

¹ January 11, 2007 - <http://pib.nic.in/release/release.asp?relid=34561>

Committees as mandated by Section 33b of the Wild Life Protection Act 1972 could be used as a platform to achieve this successfully.

We urge the government to adopt these guidelines in place of or additional to the MoEF Guidelines. This could go a long way in achieving a systematic process to assess which are the most critical areas for conservation, and move towards ways for people to either coexist or consent to be relocated. Caution should be applied when using the guidelines in complex situations of recent encroachments or settlements such as in northeast India. *Both the imperatives of conservation and livelihoods security can be met with such an approach.*

We also urge the PMO and MoEF to initiate an ongoing dialogue and consultations on the process of establishing CWH. A good first step would be national and regional meetings bringing together different stakeholders and rights-holders with the aim of arriving at a constructive process of declaring and managing critical wildlife habitats, which is also specific to regional contexts.

(for the signatories)



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‘Future of Conservation in India (FoC)’ is a network of ecological and social organizations and individuals committed to effective and equitable conservation of biodiversity. FoC's objective is to foster dialogue and engagement in complex conservation issues, and help tackle the increasing threats that both biodiversity and people's livelihoods face. This includes joint action on areas of agreement, and attempts at evolving common understanding on issues where there are differences.

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