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EDITORIAL

Do protected areas protect wildlife?

Do protected areas protect wildlife? The answer to this question is perhaps not as simple as it might appear at first glance. The instinctive answer could be a 'yes' or a 'no', depending on one's own positionality and experience and also the body of evidence one is looking at. One could argue as indeed has been argued worldwide and also in India that the protected area (PA) network, all its limitations notwithstanding, has held wildlife and conservation in good stead. Habitats have been protected, species given a second shot at survival and many ecosystems with their multiple services have been enhanced.

There is the argument, on the other hand, that PA boundaries have no meaning and offer limited protection if any at all. The wiping out of the tiger from PAs with the highest level of 'protection' (Sariska and Panna TRs) is a good example. If the tiger could not be protected here, how can one claim that the PA protects anything at all? It is well known and accepted too that PAs mean very little for long-ranging species like elephants, wolves, bustards and even less for marine species like sea turtles.

There is also the deeper question of protection of wildlife by whom and for what? And protection from whom? Does the state and its apparatus protect wildlife from the people? Can the state protect wildlife from itself? Can the people not provide protection? What happens when the state itself becomes the biggest threat?

The questions are not just conceptual; they have a real bearing on the ground as the stories in this issue of the *PA Update* demonstrate rather starkly. There is a massive dismantling going on at the institutional level of the frameworks of protection and conservation. More and more land including forests and other sensitive ecosystems are being handed over for non-forestry activities

(industries, industrial activities, infrastructure, tourism and the like) in the pursuit of what is called development. Over 550 sq km of forest, for example, has been diverted in just the last three years, with mining and infrastructure taking up the maximum. What role can a PA then play in such a scenario of increasingly devastated and fragmented landscapes and an increasing footprint of extraction of resources?

PAs themselves are not safe anymore as evident from innumerable cases across the country. They are being denotified in part or in full for multiple reasons – in Rajasthan for allowing stone mining for a temple and in the Great Nicobar Island to allow for a massive port that will devastate one of the most ecologically sensitive and tectonically active regions of the planet. We see in Maharashtra, for instance, that good tiger bearing forests are being given away for mining in one part of the state at the same time as new PAs are notified in others.

What is the PA a solution for in such a situation? How can it be a solution at all? Or is it a diversionary tactic that makes some of us 'feel good' that something is being done for conservation and for wildlife?

The case of Great Nicobar Island is illustrative. An entire sanctuary that constitutes one of the most important nesting sites of the Giant leatherback turtles was de-notified a year and a half ago for a massive Rs. 75000 crore development project that is being pushed here at a feverish pace. Nearly 130 sq km of pristine tropical forest will be destroyed with the project proponents, the government itself, admitting that more than eight lakh trees will have to be cut. And now a few weeks ago, a three new PAs were notified here to project that this loss is being compensated for adequately.

The body is being killed with multiple brutal cuts and we are being mocked with band-aids as solutions. And, that band-aid ironically, even tragically, is a protected area.

NEWS FROM INDIAN STATES

ANDAMAN & NICOBAR ISLANDS

Three new PAs in the Nicobar Islands

Three new protected areas have been notified in the Nicobar Islands. These are the Leatherback Turtle Sanctuary spread over 13.75 sq. km on Little Nicobar Island, a Coral Sanctuary at Meroe Island with an extent of 2.73 sq km and a 1.29 sq km Megapode Sanctuary at Menchal Island. A draft notification for the three was issued on 18 May 2022 and a final order by the district collector, Nicobar district on 19th of July.

The sanctuaries have been created in lieu of the denotification of the Galathea Bay Wildlife Sanctuary to allow for the Rs 75000 crore integrated development project on Great Nicobar that includes a trans-shipment port in Galathea Bay. Zero km extent ecologically sensitive zones were also notified about a year ago for the Galathea National Park so that land could be made available for the project, which will need over 130 sq km of forest land and will also entail the cutting of 8.5 lakhs trees.

(Also see *PA Update* Vol. XXVII, No. 1)

Source: Order No. 123, Office of the Collector, Nicobar District, 19/07/2022.

‘Minutes of the 297th meeting of the Expert Appraisal Committee Infrastructure 1, Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change, 25/05/2022.

BIHAR

148 gharials released in Gandak River

In a joint effort by the Wildlife Trust of India (WTI) and the Bihar Department of Environment, Forest and Climate Change, 148 gharials were released in the Gandak River in the month of June. The gharials were released at two locations - Dhanaiya Reta and

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Nidhiharahwa - near Valmikinagar in the Bagaha sub-division of Bihar’s West Champaran district.

Subrat Kumar Behera, Project Head, Gandak Gharial Recovery Project, WTI, informed that the Gandak now has the second-largest gharial population after the Chambal.

Gharial nesting has been consistently observed in the Gandak in every nesting year since 2018 and the river has an important gharial population with evidence of breeding. While 259 gharials were found in 2020, their number stood at 236 in 2021.

Source: ‘Gandak now second largest gharial population in country’, www.hindustantimes.com, 03/07/2022.

KERALA

Kerala protests SC order to create one-km ESZ

The Supreme Court (SC) order on June 3 to create a one-km ecologically sensitive zone (ESZ) around protected areas has seen mounting protests in opposition and criticism in the hilly regions of Kerala.

A three-judge bench of Justices L Nageswara Rao, BR Gavai and Aniruddha Bose pronounced the judgement in a petition seeking protection of forest lands in the Nilgiris district of Tamil Nadu. The judgement referred to the guidelines on buffer zones issued by the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEFCC) of the Government of India on 9th February 2011. If the existing ESZ goes beyond the one-km buffer zone or if any statutory instrument prescribes a higher limit, then such extended boundary shall prevail, the order said.

As per the National Wildlife Action Plan (2002-2016), land within 10 km of the boundaries of national parks and wildlife sanctuaries are to be notified as ESZ. However, the general rule of a 10 km boundary may vary depending on the ecological status of the land.

Areas beyond 10 km can also be notified by the Union government as ESZ if they hold larger ecologically important and sensitive corridors.

Idukki district observed a *hartal* on 24 June that was called by the ruling CPI(M), seeking the Center's intervention. In the Wayanad district too there were protests by political parties, farmers' outfits and trade bodies. The Kerala Independent Farmers Association (KIFA) said that around 20 towns and one lakh families in the state will be affected if the order is implemented. KIFA said that given the total extent of protected areas in Kerala, one km of ESZ from their boundaries would include around 4 lakh acres of human settlements, including farmlands and this would impact the lives of lakhs of people. State Forest Minister AK Saseendran said that the SC direction to implement an ESZ of one km around each protected forest would cause considerable hardships to the people who are living or working close to forest areas.

The High Range Protection Committee in Idukki district and residents and traders of Sulthan Bathery town in Wayanad district are reported to have said that the decision was the outcome of the alleged conspiracy of environmental organisations and the forest department.

Kerala Agricultural University wildlife science department dean PO Nameer and the Head of Forest Force (HFF), Bennichen Thomas, however pointed out that the livelihood of farmers will not be affected. But a section of environmentalists and policy activists have criticised the order citing that it does not address topographical features and has no scientific basis. They further urged the authorities to consider participatory planning exercises while implementing the ESZ.

Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan said that the interests of the people living in areas which may fall in the ESZ, also have to be protected. Therefore, his government will consider legal solutions to the problem and will raise the issue before the central government.

Source: 'Why 'eco-sensitive zones' in Kerala's protected forests have left the state divided', www.outlookindia.com, 24/06/2022.

MAHARASHTRA

State declares 10 CWHs and three new WLSs; two in Marathwada

In a meeting held in June earlier this year, the Maharashtra State Board for Wildlife declared 10 critical wildlife habitats (CWHs), besides notifying three new wildlife sanctuaries (WLSs) and 12 new conservation reserves across the state. These include the Naigaon Peacock Sanctuary (NPS) and Yedshi Ramling WLS in Marathwada.

The Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act 2006 (FRA) provides for determination and notification of CWHs within national parks and WLSs. As per the FRA, CWHs are areas that are required to be kept as inviolate for the purposes of wildlife conservation.

Spread over 30 sq. km, NPS has a sizeable population of Indian peafowl. Yedshi Ramling WLS situated in Kalamb taluka of Osmanabad district is home to chinkara, hyena, wolf, wild bear, fox among other faunal species.

Source: 'Maharashtra: 2 Marathwada sanctuaries get critical wildlife habitats tag', www.timesofindia.indiatimes.com, 07/06/2022.

Coal mining proposed in tiger forests of Pandharkawada Forest Division

Yazdani International Pvt. Ltd., an Odisha-based mining company, has sought the Maharashtra Forest Department (FD)'s permission to divert 147 ha of forest, in Yavatmal district's Pandharkawada Forest Division for mining of coal. The company has

proposed to open up the Marki Mangli II Coal Block which was auctioned by the Centre in 2020. The proposal was accepted for consideration by the Pandharkawada nodal office on 19 May 2022.

Experts and officials have raised concerns as the proposed mine forms part of a crucial tiger corridor facilitating dispersion of the large carnivores between Tadoba Andhari Tiger Reserve (TR) in Chandrapur, Bor TR in Wardha, Tipeswar Wildlife Sanctuary (WLS) and Painganga WLS in Yavatmal, and the Kawal TR in Telangana.

The then state environment minister Aaditya Thackeray had, in August 2020, written to the minister for coal and mines, Pralhad Joshi, saying that the Marki-Mangli-II Coal Block auction threatens the wildlife in the region since it falls in the corridor of TATR-Tipeswar WLS. The area is also part of the approved Tiger Conservation Plan (TCP) of the Tadoba Andhari TR.

The project proponent has mentioned in the proposal that the forest component of the mining lease area “does not fall” in either protected areas or ecologically sensitive zones; it also does not fall in any of the 32 tiger corridors identified by the National Tiger Conservation Authority, nor is it included in Wildlife Institute of India’s publication on the Eastern Vidarbha Landscape. However, the presence of wildlife has been witnessed in some parts of the compartments on the fringe of the mining lease. Therefore, as required by the provisions under Wildlife Protection Act, 1972, the project will implement mitigation measures for the protection of wildlife.

A wildlife conservationist and member of the state board for wildlife (SBWL) said that it is “incorrect” to state that the project site is not part of any corridor. The area in question, in Pardi, Swali and Ruikot villages, has significant tiger presence. Tigress T1, or Avni (*PA Updates XXV*, Nos. 5 & 2), was a resident of the same forest division. The same view was echoed by two senior forest officials as well.

Sunil Limaye, the principal chief conservator of forests (wildlife), Maharashtra, directed inquiries to Naresh Zurmura, additional principal chief conservator of forests, who said that this proposal has not yet reached his office after scrutiny from field officials. If the proposal is suitable and site-specific, only then will it be recommended by the nodal officer concerned. Otherwise, it will be rejected at their level only, he is reported to have said.



Source: Prayag Arora-Desai. ‘Odisha firms seek to divert 146 hectares of tiger habitat for Marki Mangli II coal mine’, www.hindustantimes.com, 06/06/2022.

Bhikshu Sangh claims Ramdegi Hills of Tadoba Andhari TR; PCCF issues orders for removal of encroachment

While the Principal Chief Conservator of Forest (PCCF) (wildlife) has issued directions following orders passed by the Nagpur bench of the Bombay High Court (HC) to remove encroachments on forest land in Ramdegi in the Tadoba buffer, the Bhikshu Sangh has staked claim over the Ramdegi Hills. Referring to the HC order issued on March 2, 2022, the PCCF (wildlife) asked the Tadoba Andhari Tiger Reserve (TR) field director to take the help of the police and district authorities and remove the encroachments.

However, the lawyer representing the Bhikshu Sangh said in the public interest litigation filed in this regard, that there were no directions issued by the court to remove any encroachments, nor has it been observed that

there is encroachment over the land. The HC has simply issued directions to the PCCF (wildlife) to consider the representation of the petitioner, the Sangh has said. Further, the lawyer claimed that the area of about 10 acres of land is occupied legitimately by the Bhikshu Sangh for more than 35 years and that it has already applied for forest rights over the said area in 2011. Their claim has been approved and sanctioned by the sub-divisional level committee and it is now pending with the district-level committee formed under the Forest Rights Act 2006 (FRA).

The lawyer said that the forest authority issued notice to the occupier in respect of showing evidence regarding its legitimate possession and pendency of claims under FRA and the occupant has already submitted the reply showing and demonstrating its right and fact of pendency of claims over the area.

Source: Vijay Pinjarkar. 'Nagpur: Bhikshu Sangh stakes claim over Ramdegi in Tadoba buffer', www.timesofindia.indiatimes.com, 21/06/2022.

RAJASTHAN

State approves stone mining in Bandh Baretha WLS for Ayodhya temple

The Rajasthan government has issued environmental clearances to 37 letter of intent (LoI) holders for restarting mining in Banshi Paharpur region of Bharatpur district. The pink sandstone will be used to construct the Ram temple in Ayodhya. The mining area has been carved out from the Bandh Baretha Wildlife Sanctuary (WLS).

The Centre had earlier granted in-principle approval for the diversion of 398 ha of forest land in Bharatpur for mining. Additional chief secretary (mines) issued a statement, June 24, stating that the legal mining of pink and red stone has already begun this month in three mines in the region.

The official said that the state has prepared 41 plots in Banshi Paharpur and obtained the first cluster clearance after auction through the Centre's e-portal. Earlier it had issued environmental clearance to 12 LoI holders out of 41; now, the clearance has been issued to all the stakeholders except four, who have not applied for it yet.

The official said that chief minister (CM) Ashok Gehlot had made efforts to exclude the Banshi Paharpur, Sukhasila and Kot areas from the sanctuary. Legal mining in the area had stopped in December 1996 following a Supreme Court order prohibiting non-forestry activities without diversion. Last year, a standing committee of the state board for wildlife headed by the CM cleared a proposal to shift the sanctuary south-westward to exclude three forest blocks damaged irreparably by mining. At the time the government made no mention of the need for supply of construction material for the temple.

Functionaries of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad in Ayodhya had, reportedly, warned against blocking the supply of the pink sandstone for the construction of the temple.

Source: 'After diverting forest land, Rajasthan clears mining of pink sandstone for Ram temple', www.indianexpress.com, 26/06/2022.

FD proposes TR tag for Karauli-Sarmathura-Dholpur sanctuary areas

The Rajasthan Forest Department (FD) has started work to notify the Karauli-Sarmathura-Dholpur sanctuary areas as a tiger reserve (TR). The proposed TR houses nine tigers.

As per the preliminary proposal, the TR will be spread over an area of 1,058 sq. km including a 368 sq. km core and a buffer of 690 sq. km. Of the total proposed core area, 197 sq. km and 170 sq. km come under Karauli and Dholpur districts respectively. The small portion of forest block falling in Bharatpur district has also been incorporated in the proposed TR.

The FD will forward the proposal to the National Tiger Conservation Authority for its final nod. The process has been started and it will take at least one year to complete, a forest official said.

The FD is also in the process of finalising the proposal to declare ecologically sensitive zones (ESZs) of Ranthambore National Park, Sariska TR, and the Kumbhalgarh Wildlife Sanctuary.



Source: ‘Rajasthan: Forest department gears up to notify fifth tiger reserve’, www.timesofindia.indiatimes.com, 01/06/2022.

FD to prepare fresh draft for ESZ around Sariska TR

The Rajasthan Forest Department (FD) will prepare a fresh draft to declare the area around the Sariska Tiger Reserve (TR) in Alwar as an ecologically sensitive zone (ESZ). The decision is an outcome of the Supreme Court’s recent directions in the matter.

The FD had earlier determined the ESZ to be between zero and one km from the reserve boundaries. After the ESZ boundary was marked as one km from the boundary resistance mounted from various sections of society including politicians, villagers, hoteliers and businessmen. A forest official said that as many villages including Thanagazi, which have a high human population density, were included in the previous ESZ in March last year, villagers staged a protest. It was claimed that nearly four lakh people living in 116 villages would be affected by the ESZ.

Source: ‘Sariska tiger turf’s periphery to become eco-sensitive zone’, timesofindia.indiatimes.com, 13/07/2022.

TAMIL NADU

State refutes allegations of human rights violations in Anaimalai TR

The state government has submitted a report to the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) refuting the allegations of a Delhi-based NGO that the forest department (FD) violated rights of 23 Kadar tribal families by forcefully evicting them from Theppakulammedu in the Anaimalai Tiger Reserve (ATR) in December 2021.

The NHRC had, on 28 December 2021, sought a report from the state following a complaint from the Indigenous Rights Advocacy Centre (IRAC) alleging that the FD dismantled the tribal huts without prior notice. It had further noted that the FD’s action was illegal and given the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, also inhuman.

The 23 tribal families were originally inhabitants of the Kallarkudi settlement, which was severely damaged in a massive landslide in August 2019. Later, the tribals re-grouped and sought title rights in Theppakulammedu, located on the fringes of the TR. Considering their plight, the state government agreed to issue title rights to 21 tribal families and handed over the documents during an event in November 2021. Trouble reportedly started in December when the tribals attempted to build huts outside areas assigned to them. The authorities prevented the construction of such huts as it would be deemed an encroachment.

The NHRC had asked for the report to be submitted within four weeks (at the end of December 2021). When this was not done even four months later, the NHRC issued summons to the concerned authorities to appear before the commission on June 6. It, however, agreed to dispense with the personal appearance if the

report was submitted by May 30; this the state complied with.

The Coimbatore district collector (DC) conducted an inquiry and found no human-rights violation. The tribal families were given title rights, said a senior government official. The Coimbatore DC said that the entire process of conferring individual rights to Kadar Tribes of Kallarkudi at Theppakulamedu was consultative and there was no instance of human rights violation.

Source: SV Krishna Chaitanya. 'ATR Kadar tribe eviction: NHRC issues summons to Tamil Nadu Chief Secretary, State submits report', www.newindianexpress.com, 04/06/2022.

TELANGANA

Endowments wing seeks land in Amrabad TR for temple facilities

The Telangana Endowments Department has sought diversion of five hectares of forest in the Amrabad Tiger Reserve (TR) for the construction of amenities for an ancient temple here. These include among others a marriage hall, cottages for devotees and the construction of a road.

The endowments officer of Sri Pabbathi Anjaneya Swamy temple in Maddimadugu village in Padara mandal recently wrote to the ministry of environment, forest and climate change seeking the diversion. The temple is located deep inside the Nallamala forests close to Krishna River. As the shrine is 130 km from Srisaialam, many devotees visiting the Sri Bhramaramba Mallikarjuna temple in Srisaialam also visit this temple.

The temple authorities have offered to provide alternative land belonging to Laxmi Narasimha Swamy temple in Kollapur mandal to the forest department at Machinonipally revenue limits in lieu of this diversion.

Source: U Sudhakar Reddy. 'Telangana: Endowments wing seeks tiger reserve land for temple choultries, marriage hall in Nallamala', www.timesofindia.indiatimes.com, 24/07/2022

Encroachments in Kawal TR; FD declares Koya Poshamguda villagers ineligible to get rights under FRA

The Telangana Forest Department (FD) has alleged that acts of occupying forest areas especially in the Kawal Tiger Reserve (TR) spread over Mancherial, Adilabad, Nirmal, and Komaram Bheem Asifabad districts in the guise of *podu* cultivation are increasing. In addition to the people whose applications for *podu* land rights are pending with the state government, there are others who have joined in land grab actions. These acts, the FD has said, includes the burning of a machan on which forest protection watchers were sleeping this January.

The matter became more complex after the FD filed a case of attempt to murder in the Dandepally police station, in Mancherial district. This is related to the issue of some villagers clearing 25 acres of forest on the fringes of Koya Poshamguda village in Kondapur forest beat despite the fact that *podu* agriculture was never practiced in the area.

This land is in the buffer area of TR, and regular movement of tigers has been reported here. The Kawal TR has become part of the range of tigers that come here from neighbouring Maharashtra, said a senior FD official. Further, he added that the land under dispute was never cultivated by anyone and those occupying the land had left behind women and children in the forest as they believed that once they left the land, the FD would immediately take possession and continue with its moisture conservation work and tree planting.

On June 9, district forest officer (DFO) Shivani Dogra along with the Integrated Tribal Development Agency (ITDA) Utloor project

officer Ankith addressed reporters at Thallapet village in Dandepalli mandal. The DFO said that documents of ownership or *pattas* would be given to the eligible as per Forest Rights Act 2006 (FRA). They clarified that only those forest lands which were tilled before 2005 would be eligible and further that the dwellers of Koya Poshamguda were not entitled to get rights as they were not tilling the lands here before 2005.

The DFO stated that the land was notified in the buffer zone of the reserve created in 2012. She added that 52 families identified in the village would be given three acres of land each somewhere, but they were not withdrawing their protests. She further pointed out that the dwellers had cut trees located over eight hectares of land. She also noted that the residents were prone to be attacked by wild animals if they continued here.

The FD also issued a press release saying that those seeking to occupy the forest land were placing women and children in the front to carry on with the illegal occupation. It further pointed out that some people were attempting to politicise the illegal occupation. Minister for forests and environment A Indrakaran Reddy and principal chief conservator of forests RM Dobriyal were briefed about the situation by the FD officials; they informed them that all actions so far by the FD staff in the field were as per the law.

Source: Balu Pulipaka. 'Illegal occupation of forest land goes on unabated', www.deccanchronicle.com, 13/06/2022.
'25 acres of forest land encroached: Kawal Tiger Reserve Official', www.telanganatoday.com, 10/06/2022.
'Pattas to be given to lands tilled before 2005: DFO Shivani Dogra', www.telanganatoday.com, 09/06/2022.

UTTARAKHAND

CAG seeks more information on CAMPA fund irregularities in Corbett TR

The Comptroller and Auditor General of India (CAG) has sought documents related to alleged financial irregularities in the Kalagarh and Lansdowne Forest Divisions of the Corbett Tiger Reserve (CTR) from Uttarakhand's Head of Forest Force (HFF), Vinod Kumar Singhal. The HFF had written to the state government recently, recommending a CAG probe into the alleged misappropriation of funds from the Compensatory Afforestation Fund Management and Planning Authority (CAMPA) in the two forest divisions of CTR. Now, the CAG has sought relevant documents from the officer to start its probe.

Funds worth crores of rupees from CAMPA and other heads had been released for the two forest divisions but were not utilised for works they were meant for, the HFF had said. Suspended forest officer Kishan Chand is reported to have misused Rs. 1.43 crores of the funds to buy refrigerators and air-conditioners rather than spending the amount on sanctioned works. Further he claimed that the then HFF and chief wildlife warden (CWLW) did not pay attention to the irregularities committed by Kishan Chand, who was the divisional forest officer of Kalagarh.

The National Tiger Conservation Authority first conducted a probe into the allegations. Taking *suo motu* cognisance of its findings, the Uttarakhand High Court also conducted a probe into the irregularities. The matter finally reached the Supreme Court and a central empowered committee is now probing it. Along with Kishan Chand, the then ranger Brij Bihari Sharma and CWLW, JS Suhag, are currently under suspension.

Source: 'CAG seeks documents related to financial irregularities in Corbett Tiger Reserve', www.newindianexpress.com, 31/05/2022.

UTTAR PRADESH

Survey to study Dudhwa NP – Kishanpur WLS wildlife corridor



The Uttar Pradesh Forest Department in collaboration with the World Wide Fund (WWF) for Nature-India has launched a survey of the trans-Sharda area between the Dudhwa National Park and Kishanpur Wildlife Sanctuary. This vast stretch dotted with agricultural fields, human habitations apart from the Sharda river-bed is used regularly by wild animals such as tigers, elephants and leopards.

The survey will assess how many species have been using this vital corridor, the frequency of visits, age-group and stay-period of the wild animals there and how cane-farming impacts the movement of these animals. It will also study human interventions and other biotic influences to find out ways to safeguard wild animals and human lives.

Source: ‘Dudhwa-Kishanpur corridor: Survey begins to track movement of wild animals’, www.hindustantimes.com, 14/06/2022.

UP to set up dolphin park; proposes TR tag for Ranipur sanctuary

The 13th meeting of the Uttar Pradesh (UP) State Board for Wildlife (SBWL) was held recently under the chairmanship of chief minister Yogi Adityanath. Decisions taken included those for setting up of a dolphin park and the declaration of the Ranipur Sanctuary in Chitrakoot as the state’s fourth tiger reserve (TR).

For the night safari and modern zoo to be developed in the Kukrail forest area in Lucknow, different departments such as forest, urban development, public works, and Awas Vikas have been asked to coordinate by the SBWL.

Additionally, it was decided to launch a one-district-one-destination project, in which various spots will be developed to boost eco-tourism. Such spots have already been selected in 56 districts. Local youth will be trained to act as nature guides. In the remaining districts, the selection of spots will be done soon, the state government has said.

Four new animal rescue centres were also approved for Hastinapur (Meerut Forest Division), Madhwalia (Maharajganj), Bahilpurwa (Chitrakoot Forest Division) and Gopalpur (Pilibhit TR).

Source: ‘UP plans to develop a dolphin park, 4th tiger reserve’, www.hindustantimes.com, 11/06/2022.

WEST BENGAL

NGT directs West Bengal to close all hotels, restaurants inside Buxa TR

The National Green Tribunal (NGT) has directed the West Bengal government to close all hotels and restaurants and camping stations inside the Buxa Tiger Reserve (TR) within two months starting June. It stated that the conversion of forest villages to revenue villages is not a permit to allow commercial activities in such areas.

The NGT’s eastern bench, in its order on May 30, also directed that a facility run by the state tourism department be closed down and turned into an interpretation centre. If not done within two months, it asked for the building to be demolished. Further, the tribunal directed that establishments operated by private persons be closed following due process and placed the responsibility for the

same on the state pollution control board, field director, BTR and the district magistrate.

The state government informed the NGT that establishments run by it have been closed while proceedings have been initiated against the privately owned facilities.

The NGT had noted that there are 69 establishments under private ownership in the TR and 20 facilities are owned by the state. Some of these were in the core area and others on the banks of river Jayanti. The forest department (FD) had earlier informed the NGT that the activities of these lodges were confined to areas which were once ‘forest villages’ and designated as ‘revenue villages’ in 2014. It also said that all the 69 tourist lodges, hotels and restaurants operated by private owners are confined to enclave revenue villages which were earlier forest villages. The FD stated that there are 37 such revenue villages inside the forest areas of the reserve.

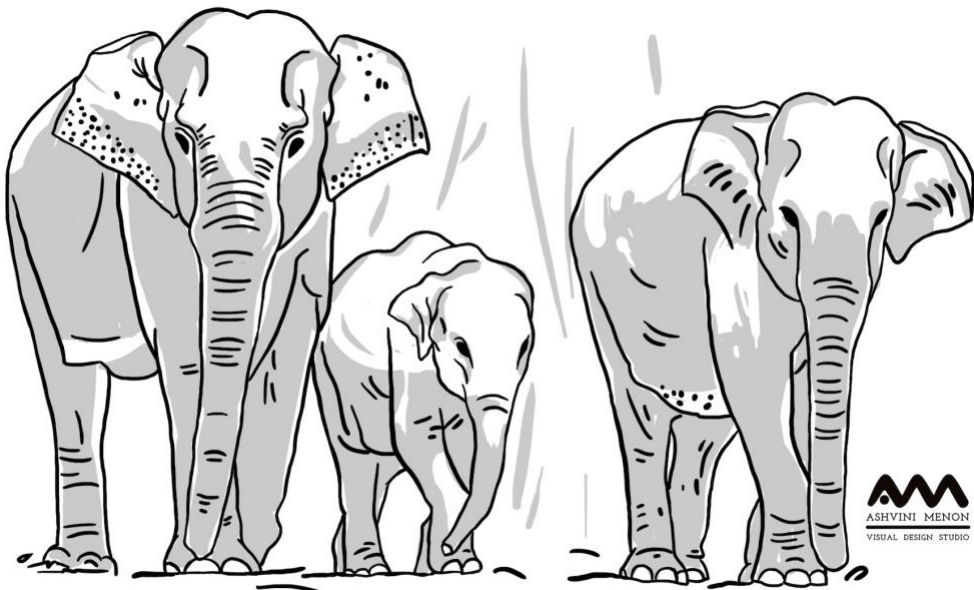
An affidavit filed by the state in February 2022 had mentioned that conversion of the forest villages to revenue ones was made under the provisions of the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers

(Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006 (FRA), which does not require approval of the Forest Conservation Act, 1980 (FCA). The NGT bench noted in its order, however, that while protection of forest rights under the FRA may not require following of procedure under the FCA “the same cannot be held to permit commercial activity in such area”.

The directions by the NGT came on a review prayer by the state tourism department on NGT’s order issued on July 27, 2017, which had mentioned that the establishment operated by it be demolished. The tourism department claimed that it is a camping station on the outskirts of Jayanti village and there is no permanent structure.

An environmentalist had also moved the NGT, mentioning the existence of private and government tourist lodges and restaurants in the reserve area.

Source: ‘NGT orders Bengal govt to close all hotels, restaurants in Buxa Tiger Reserve in two months’, www.theprint.in, 05/06/2022.



NATIONAL NEWS FROM INDIA

Forest Cover in India as per India State of Forest Report – 2021, (Area in Hectares)

S. No.	State/UTs	Area	Total Forest Cover	% of Total Area
1	Andhra Pradesh	1,62,96,800	29,78,004	18.28
2	Arunachal Pradesh	83,74,300	66,43,100	79.33
3	Assam	78,43,800	28,31,200	36.09
4	Bihar	94,16,300	7,38,100	7.84
5	Chhattisgarh	1,35,19,200	55,71,700	41.21
6	Delhi	1,48,300	19,500	13.15
7	Goa	3,70,200	2,24,400	60.62
8	Gujarat	1,96,24,400	14,92,600	7.61
9	Haryana	44,21,200	1,60,300	3.63
10	Himachal Pradesh	55,67,300	15,44,300	27.73
11	Jharkhand	79,71,600	23,72,100	29.76
12	Karnataka	1,91,79,100	38,73,000	20.19
13	Kerala	38,85,200	21,25,300	54.70
14	Madhya Pradesh	3,08,25,200	77,49,300	25.14
15	Maharashtra	3,07,71,300	50,79,800	16.51
16	Manipur	22,32,700	16,59,800	74.34
17	Meghalaya	22,42,900	17,04,600	76.00
18	Mizoram	21,08,100	17,82,000	84.53
19	Nagaland	16,57,900	12,25,100	73.90
20	Odisha	1,55,70,700	52,15,600	33.50
21	Punjab	50,36,200	1,84,700	3.67
22	Rajasthan	3,42,23,900	16,65,500	4.87
23	Sikkim	7,09,600	3,34,100	47.08
24	Tamil Nadu	1,30,06,000	26,41,900	20.31
25	Telangana	1,12,07,700	21,21,400	18.93
26	Tripura	10,48,600	7,72,200	73.64
27	Uttar Pradesh	2,40,92,800	14,81,800	6.15
28	Uttarakhand	53,48,300	24,30,500	45.44
29	West Bengal	88,75,200	16,83,200	18.96
30	A&N Islands	8,24,900	6,74,400	81.75
31	Chandigarh	11,400	2,288	20.07
32	Dadra & Nagar Haveli; Daman & Diu	60,200	22,775	37.83
33	Jammu & Kashmir			39.15
34	Ladakh			1.35
35	Lakshadweep	3,000	2,710	90.33
36	Puducherry	49,000	5,330	10.88
TOTAL		32,87,46,900	7,13,78,903	21.71

Source: 'Forest Cover in India', Press Information Bureau, Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change, Government of India, 18/07/2022.

Over 550 sq km forest diverted for non-forestry purposes in three years; mining accounts for maximum

A total of 554.3 sq. km of forest area in the country has been diverted for non-forestry purposes in the last three years. Mining accounted for the diversion of the maximum 112.78 sq. km with road construction being next at 100.07 sq. km followed by irrigation facilities at 97.27 sq. km. The data was presented in the Lok Sabha mid-July by minister of state for environment, Ashwini Kumar Choubey.

Additionally, the Centre approved the diversion of 69.47 sq. km of forest land for defence projects, 53.44 sq. km for hydel projects, 47.40 sq. km for laying of transmission lines and 18.99 sq. km for railways in the last three years.

The government had allowed the diversion of 195.87 sq. km of forest land in 2019, 175.28 sq. km in 2020 and 183.18 sq. km in 2021.

However, according to the Forest Survey of India, the total forest cover of the country has increased by 12,294 sq. km in the last seven years. The latest India State of Forest Report says that the country’s forest cover increased by 1,540 sq. km between 2019 and 2021 (see table above).

Source: ‘554 sq. km forest area diverted for non-forestry purposes in last 3 years’, www.business-standard.com, 20/07/2022.

1,059 tiger deaths in country since 2012; MP records highest number

According to data released recently by the National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA), there have been 1059 tiger deaths in India since 2012 with Madhya Pradesh (MP) recording the highest number.

According to the tiger census of 2019, India has 2,967 tigers, of which 526 were in Madhya Pradesh. Experts said that MP’s tiger

population has gone up in the past ten years; for obvious reasons, it will also have a higher number of natural deaths. However, one needs to keep a watch on this number because with high tiger numbers inside and outside TRs, MP can be a soft target for poachers. They pointed out that the NTCA has advised states to set up their own Special Tiger Protection Forces (STPFs) for safeguarding the big cats, especially from poachers. The Centre has made budgetary provisions for supporting the STPFs, but MP has not constituted any such force so far.

States like Karnataka, Odisha and Maharashtra have created STPFs and their results are visible as Karnataka, despite having a sizable population of tigers, has a lower mortality rate of big cats than MP.

Year-wise no. of tiger deaths (NTCA data)

Year	Tiger deaths
2022	75
2021	127
2020	106
2019	96
2018	101
2017	117
2016	121
2015	82
2014	78
2013	68
2012	88
Total	1059

State-wise nos of tiger deaths (NTCA data 2012-2020)

State	Tiger deaths
Madhya Pradesh	202
Maharashtra	141
Karnataka	123
Uttarakhand	93
Assam	60
Tamil Nadu	62
Uttar Pradesh	44
Kerala	45

State-wise no. of tiger deaths in 2022 (till 15 July)

State	Tiger deaths
Madhya Pradesh	27
Maharashtra	15
Karnataka	11
Assam	5
Kerala	4
Rajasthan	4
Uttar Pradesh	3
Andhra Pradesh	2
Bihar	1
Odisha	1
Chhattisgarh	1
Total	74

Source: ‘1,059 tiger deaths in 10 years, most in Madhya Pradesh: NTCA’, www.hindustantimes.com, 27/07/2022.

‘‘Tiger state’ MP records death of 27 big cats in 2022, highest in country’, www.newindianexpress.com, 24/07/2022.

Zoos in forest areas no longer non-forestry activity; experts express concern

The ministry of environment, forest and climate change (MoEFCC), in a letter to all states and union territories on June 8, has said that zoos approved by the Central Zoo Authority (CZA) will no longer be considered a ‘non-forestry’ activity even if they are located in forest areas.

Considering a zoo a non-forestry activity had added multiple layers of permissions to be procured from different agencies. No new zoo was planned, approved or constructed without prior approval of CZA under strict adherence to its 2009 guidelines for establishment and scientific management of zoos. Therefore, the MoEFCC’s forest advisory committee had, on 17 February 2021,

decided that zoos on forest land will be deemed as a ‘forestry’ activity.

The June 2022 letter states that MoEFCC has decided to do away with provisions of para 12.6 and 12.7 of the handbook of the Forest Conservation Act, 1980, which consider zoos, rescue centres or wildlife safaris where animals are kept for exhibition a non-forestry activity. Forest clearance from the centre would not be mandatory any more for such projects.

The letter was enclosed with guidelines for the establishment of zoos, which the CZA is supposed to follow while granting approvals. According to the guidelines, zoos in protected areas (PAs) will be avoided but in exceptional cases the fringes of the buffer zone of PAs may be considered for the construction of a zoo on forest land subject to the condition that there is no hindrance in the movement of the wild animals of the area. No private or zoos in public-private partnership mode will be allowed to come up in forests.

Environmentalists, legal experts as well as former forest officials have criticised the decision saying that a zoo is an unnecessary intrusion into forest areas as it causes fragmentation of habitat, including demands for a new road, a power line, increased vehicular traffic, mushrooming of hotels and other commercial activities. Hence, allowing zoos in forest areas without getting green clearances will only harm forest areas.

They cited the example of Haryana where forest cover accounts for less than four per cent of its total area and a relaxation in norms for revenue generation or tourism is bound to harm conservation. Also, establishing zoos in forest areas will mean having to cut down trees to build the structure. Since it is now considered a ‘forestry activity’, it will no longer be necessary to carry out compensatory afforestation, which means forest land and green cover will only be reduced. Further, they have expressed concern over the threat of zoonotic diseases, thus, pointing it out as a strong enough basis for reviewing the decision. Stating that forest land is to be diverted only if

there is no option but to use the forest land, the Legal Initiative for Forest and Environment (LIFE) has questioned the need for zoos to be set up in forest areas at all.

Source: Ipsita Pati. 'Zoos in forests against conservation policy: Greens', www.timesofindia.indiatimes.com, 21/06/2022.

Jayashree Nandi. 'Zoos can now be set up in forests sans green nod', www.hindustantimes.com, 14/06/2022.

SOUTH ASIA

Pakistan requests Nepal for juvenile gharials for reintroduction



The Pakistan government has requested Nepal for juvenile gharials for a reintroduction programme in Pakistan. The request however faces multiple obstacles including funding shortages and concerns in Nepal that Pakistan may not have done enough to change the conditions that led to the gharial's local extinction there in the first place.

Gharials were once found in the Indus River in Pakistan and the Brahmaputra that flows through China, India and Bangladesh. Today, the species is virtually extinct from countries other than Nepal and India, where it occurs in the Ganges River and its tributaries. The governments of both Nepal and India maintain captive-breeding programmes to maximize the number of gharial eggs that

survive and to introduce healthy hatchlings into river systems.

The last time gharials were recorded in Pakistan was around 1985 in the Nara Canal, a channel of the Indus, said Rab Nawaz, senior director of biodiversity at World Wildlife Fund (WWF) -Pakistan. Some reports were received from the same area after 2000, but surveys by WWF and the local wildlife department were not successful in locating them.

The Pakistan government wants to reintroduce gharials in the Nara Canal wetland system. Nawaz pointed out that the region has a relatively low human population and a good network of protected areas such as the Deh Akro I and II wetland complexes consisting of 36 lakes with desert, wetland, marsh and agricultural landscapes. An expert assessment would be necessary to ascertain the exact number of gharials for reintroduction, and it is necessary to address the issues that led to the extinction of gharials in Pakistan before they can be reintroduced, said Nawaz.

While Nepal's Department of National Parks and Wildlife Conservation, confirmed to have received a communication from Pakistan on the issue, a decision on the matter is said to be pending. Further, the official pointed out that it would be difficult for the proposal to move ahead as gharials are virtually extinct in Pakistan. Nepal would have liked to get some gharials from the Indus and send some there to ensure genetic diversity in both the populations. As that is not the case, it would be difficult for Nepal to send gharials to Pakistan.

According to recent counts, fewer than 200 breeding adults survive in the wild in Nepal, where the species is threatened by fishing activity, changes in river flow, and poaching.

Source: Abhaya Raj Joshi. 'Return of the king? Pakistan moves to bring gharials from Nepal to its rivers', <https://news.mongabay.com>, 02/07/2022.

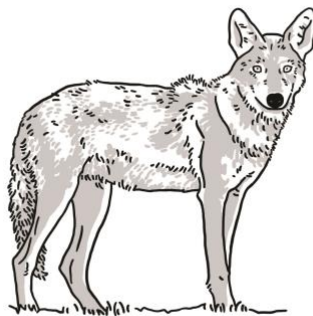
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News Links -

<https://bestmediainfo.com/2022/04/iaa-announces-winners-of-olive-crown-awards-2022>

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VjbHwHtIeIg&ab_channel=IAAIndiaChapter

IMPORTANT BIRD AREAS UPDATE

ASIA

Vulture conservation activities in Asia: An update from the 11th Annual Save Asia's Vultures from Extinction (SAVE) report, December 2021

Priorities for South Asia in 2022:

- Veterinary licences to be withdrawn for drugs known to be toxic to vultures: aceclofenac (a pro-drug for diclofenac), ketoprofen, nimesulide - based on good existing evidence that these NSAIDs (non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs) are unsafe for vultures.
- Develop an effective system for the regulation of veterinary drugs, based upon safety-testing on vultures - and continue this for all current painkillers (NSAIDs) and for all potential new ones entering veterinary practice.
- Evaluate safety to vultures of nimesulide in India as a priority, closely followed by other emerging veterinary NSAIDs.
- Identify additional vulture safe NSAIDs (alternatives for vets) and publicise such findings and promote existing known vulture-safe NSAIDs.
- Major efforts urgently needed to address the immediate and increasing gap in funding for vulture conservation which now jeopardises the programme.
- Promotion of network and approach of 'Vulture Safe Zones' across South Asia with expansion to include trans-boundary cooperative efforts.
- Maintain the existing vulture conservation breeding programmes throughout South Asia.
- Further secure a safe environment (>100km radius area) in Nepal for final soft releases of captive vultures and also proceed with releases in India but only where similar sized areas have been shown to be safe; always employing satellite monitoring of released birds.
- Develop national reporting systems for as many vulture deaths as possible, from any

cause, with written recording and data storage protocols and pathways for immediate transportation and reliable tissue analysis throughout the SAVE region.

- Trial poison-bait response training and awareness workshops for identified key areas within the region. These will aim to improve the recording and documentation of poisoning incidents and increase the accessibility of data on poisoning incidents.
- Use the Convention of Migratory Species' Vulture Multi-species Action Plan as a tool to promote SAVE priority actions and engage with governments and to approach CMS for funding.
- Engage IUCN translocation expertise for guidance in relation to release programmes.
- Closely support National Vulture Recovery Committees and the Regional Steering Committee (RSC) in order to facilitate the urgent implementation of the 2012 Delhi Regional Agreement and SAVE priorities.

Outstanding achievements/updates of 2021:

Despite the ongoing global pandemic of Covid-19 affecting activities across the range, there were multiple major achievements and other notable events:

- The first national ban on veterinary ketoprofen was declared by the Bangladesh Government in February 2021.
- The second vulture-safe NSAID, tolfenamic acid, was announced and publicised following publication of safety-testing results in India.
- The first fully approved 'Vulture Safe Zone' was declared in Nepal in December, approved by the SAVE Technical Advisory Committee on the basis of the high survival rate of a sufficient sample of wild satellite-tracked vultures.
- Nimesulide was confirmed experimentally as toxic to vultures in South African published study following earlier publications on wild deaths in India.

- Poison response protocols were agreed following the Cambodia workshop.
- Pharmacy surveys in Myanmar were completed and there is growing engagement of veterinarians in the Myanmar Vulture Working Group (MVWG) despite major challenges.
- The Convention of Migratory Species (CMS) Raptors Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) formed an NSAID working group.
- Many field activities and surveys, including Vulture Safe Zone work in all range countries were again limited by Covid-19 restrictions and there were new funding challenges for several partners, including major problems with timely funding for Indian breeding centres.
- Major poison baits incident killed 69 vultures in Nepal.
- Release methodology was refined (advised by SAVE TAC) to address low survival of released birds in Nepal, where a further release went ahead in November 2021, along with tagging of ten more wild White-rumped Vultures (WRVs).
- The first trial release of 10 WRVs took place in West Bengal, India.
- In Pakistan, Secretary of Forests, Wildlife and Fisheries in Punjab Province was supportive through the Drug Regulatory Authority of Pakistan in the banning of harmful drugs across the Punjab following extensive WWF NSAID/pharmacy surveys across 36 districts.
- Vibhu Prakash (BNHS/SAVE) was honoured by the Indian Government with the prestigious Directors Prani Mitra Award in October 2021 for ex-situ conservation of vultures.
- The 11th SAVE annual general meeting (AGM) and Open Day was again held online with national meetings prior to the main events. Feedback has been very positive and had over 260 registrations, almost double that from 2020.

Source: 11th Annual SAVE Report:
Reporting against Blueprint Actions
by Country for the 11th Annual
Meeting of Saving Asia's Vultures
from Extinction; [https://save-
vultures.org/news](https://save-vultures.org/news)

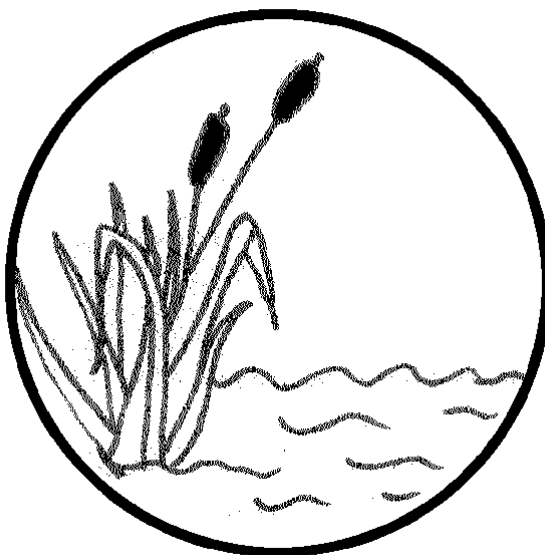
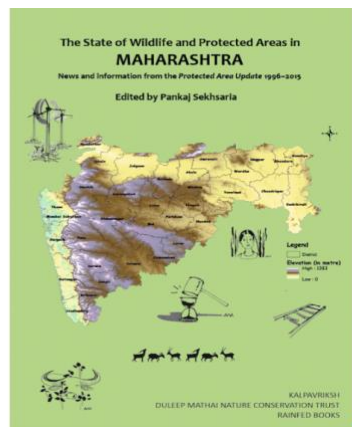
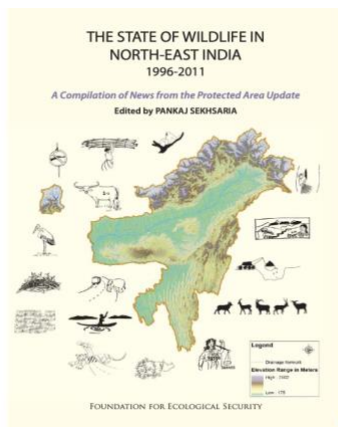
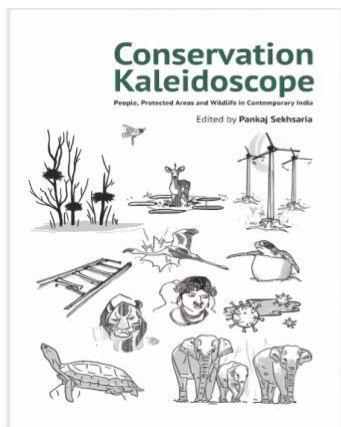


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Contemporary research in & around protected areas: An overview

1. Discovery of a rare stiped puffball *Calostoma junghuhnii* in Neora Valley National Park, India: A new record for West Bengal, India

Author(s): Shuvadeep Majumdar, Buddha Singh Rai, Ajit Rai, Ujjal Ghosh, Silanjan Bhattacharyya, Animesh Bose, Nisha Goswami, Dyutiparna Chakraborty, Jit Sarkar, Sudipta Mukherjee, Krishnendu Acharya, Prakash Pradhan

Keywords: Annual biodiversity assessment camps, Basidiomycota, Calostomataceae, Neora Valley National Park, UNESCO, Fungi

Summary: The authors have discovered a fungus named *C. junghuhnii* for the first time from West Bengal, in Neora Valley National Park. The specimen was collected during an annual biodiversity assessment camp.

Link:

<https://www.smujo.id/ajf/article/view/11085/5835>

2. Butterflies of Eravikulam National Park and its environs in the Western Ghats of Kerala, India

Author(s): Kalesh Sadasivan, Toms Augustine, Edayillam Kunhikrishnan, Baiju Kochunarayanan

Keywords: Checklist, Endemic, Grasslands, IUCN, Lepidoptera, Shola, WPA

Summary: A critical compilation of the data recorded over the last two decades resulted in determining that there are 198 species of butterflies in the Eravikulam National Park of which 35 are endemic (in some form) and 18 are threatened.

Link:

<https://threatenedtaxa.org/JoTT/article/view/7840/8629>

3. Mapping of Microbial Diversity of Gautala Reserve Forest in Aurangabad (District) (M.S.), India

Author(s): Amrin Naimoddin Mirza, Satish Sudhakar Rao Patil

Keywords: Microbial diversity, Soil microbes, Gautala Reserve Forest

Summary: Analysis of soil samples from various sites in Gautala Reserve Forest revealed that microbial diversity and count varies across geographies, habitats, seasons and climatic conditions.

Link:

<http://pubs.sciepub.com/aees/10/5/6/index.html>

4. Habitat-wise distribution of ants with special reference to their host plants in Kholahat Reserve Forest, Assam, India

Author(s): Hridisha Nandana Hazarika, Bulbuli Khanikor

Keywords: Ants, Assam, Habitat wise distribution, Kholahat Reserve forest

Summary: Thirty ant species were identified after sampling forest, grassland and human habitats for three years in Kholahat Reserve Forest, Assam. Ant diversity was highest in a forested habitat. Twenty eight species were found in both forest and grassland habitats.

Link:

<https://doi.org/10.22271/j.ento.2022.v10.i2b.8977>

5. *Burmagomphus chaukulensis*, a new species of dragonfly (Odonata: Anisoptera: Gomphidae) from the Western Ghats, Maharashtra, India

Author(s): Shantanu Joshi, Dattaprasad Sawant, Hemant Ogale, Krushnamegh Kunte

Keywords: Odonata, *Burmagomphus*, Sindhudurg, Western Ghats, endemic species, new species description, species discovery, taxonomic keys

Summary: The authors have described a new species of dragonfly named *Burmagomphus chaukulensis* from Chaukul, Sindhudurg. It differs in the shape of its hamuli (hook-like projections) which is strongly angulated with spines at both sides.

Link: <https://tinyurl.com/2p8n6kth>

6. A Taxonomic Treatment of Corticolous Mosses from Nambor Reserve Forest, Golaghat, Assam, India

Author(s): Porismita Hazarika, Jayanta Barukial

Keywords: Corticolous Mosses, Nambor Reserve Forest, Taxonomic Treatment, Assam

Summary: The researchers collected specimens from the Nambor Reserve Forest across seasons from 2018-20 to present the first ever work on taxonomic description of mosses from the state of Assam.

Link:

http://www.envirobiotechjournals.com/article_abstract.php?aid=12130&iid=345&jid=3

7. A new species of *Chiromachetes* Pocock, 1899 (Scorpiones: Hormuridae) from southern Western Ghats, India

Author(s): Akshay Khandekar, Tejas Thackeray, Swapnil Pawar, Satpal Gangalmale, Vivek Waghe, Michael E Soleglad

Keywords: Scorpion, Western Ghats, new species, Tiger Reserve, Tamil Nadu

Summary: An analysis of scorpion specimens collected from Kalakad Mundanthurai Tiger Reserve resulted in the description of a new

species. *Chiromachetes agasthyamalaiensis* is named after the Agasthyamalai mountains.

Link: <https://tinyurl.com/ycysremm>

8. Forest Fragmentation Analysis in Part of Kalsubai Harishchandragad Wildlife Sanctuary of Northern Western Ghats, Maharashtra

Author(s): Ravindra G. Jaybhaye, Yogesh P. Badhe, Priyanka S. Hingonekar

Keywords: Forest fragmentation, Landscape fragmentation Tool, Habitat loss, Western Ghats

Summary: An analysis of land use land change patterns, in part of Kalsubai Harishchandragad Wildlife Sanctuary, from 1991 to 2020 using the Landscape Fragmentation Tool identified that non-forest types such as water bodies, farms, barren land or settlements have increased while the core forest area has decreased. With more fragmentation, the edges and isolated forest patches have increased too.

Link: <https://doi.org/10.55362/IJE/2022/3560>

- This section has been collated by Anand Pendharkar and Aradhya Sardesai (SPROUTS Environment Trust, Mumbai).

Email: sproutsenvttrust@gmail.com



WEST BENGAL

Special Tiger Protection Force for Buxa Tiger Reserve

A Special Tiger Protection Force (STPF) comprising of local people and foresters will be formed in Buxa Tiger Reserve (TR) under the guidelines of the National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA). The Forest Department (FD) plans to pick 112 youth aged between 18 and 25 from among the villagers to launch the force, which will be headed by the Additional Divisional Forest Officer. The youths will be divided into four groups. Each group will have a Range Officer and two Beat Officers.

The youths will be trained in forest rules and provided with arms to take on poachers and timber smugglers. The main task of the STPF will be to prevent timber smuggling by road and water (rivers). It would also gradually build an intelligence network that can zero in on the criminals.

Source: 'Local hands to protect tiger', *The Telegraph*, 25/06/12.

139 humans killed in elephant attacks in West Bengal in the last two years

A total of 139 people were killed in elephant attacks in West Bengal over a two year period of January 2010 – 2012. Of these the deaths in North Bengal were 88 while the rest 51 were reported from South Bengal. Another 425 people were also injured by wild elephants in this period. The information was provided recently in the state assembly by the State Forest Minister, Mr Hiten Burman. He also noted that the state had disbursed a compensation of about Rs 1.44 crore for the loss of human lives and injuries in elephant attacks. Rs one lakh is given in cases of death of a person and Rs 50,000 to each of those rendered immobile. Additionally, elephants are supposed to have damaged crops over an area of 8,054 hectares in this two year period and the compensation disbursed for crop loss was Rs 2.85 crore.

The same two-year period also saw the death of 63 elephants. Of the 49 elephant deaths in North Bengal, 27 were natural and the rest accidental, but in South Bengal of 14 deaths, seven were natural and as many accidental.

The total elephant population in Bengal is said to be 652 elephants, of which a majority of 529 is found in North Bengal. The state government is also reportedly planning two rescue elephant centres of 100 acres each - one in South Khayerbari in North Bengal and the other in Nayagram under West Midnapore district in South Bengal, covering 100 acres. Arrangements are also being made to increase the number of 'Kunki elephants' in the state.

Source : '63 elephants die in 2 years in Bengal', www.timesofindia.indiatimes.com

Dudhwa NP to get six *kunkis* from Jaldapara

Six elephant calves - aged between two to five years - that were rescued from various places and raised in Jaldapara are to be permanently shifted to Dudhwa National Park (NP) in Uttar Pradesh for forest patrolling. Relocation would be carried out by the end of June though it will another three to four years before they can take on full-fledged patrolling duty.

Of these six calves, Balasundar was rescued from the banks of the Balasun river in 2007 and Rohini was found in Rohini tea garden in 2008. While Titi was rescued from the Torsha river in 2009, Teesta was rescued from the Teesta river the same year. Urmi was found in 2010 from Charabari village near Bagdogra and Saili was rescued from Saili tea garden in 2008.

Jaldapara, has 60-odd *kunkis* of whom 30 are on forest duty now. Before this, in 2007, six female *kunkis* from Jaldapara were relocated to Dudhwa NP for patrolling and two were relocated to a zoo in Japan in 2006.

Source: 'Six Jaldapara jumbos to be shifted - Calves to take up *kunki* duties in uttar pradesh', *The Telegraph*, 02/06/12.

PERSPECTIVE

The Big Cat Conundrum

Since the news of the African cheetahs (*Acinonyx jubatus jubatus*) being introduced in the Kuno National Park in Madhya Pradesh has been confirmed, there have been a barrage of opinions pouring in. Some are in favour of the move and some staunchly against it.

The Asiatic cheetah (*Acinonyx jubatus venaticus*) was declared extinct in India in 1952 after a long struggle with hunting and habitat loss. The debate on (re)introducing the cheetah has been going on since then. The initial plan was to bring in the Asiatic cheetah from Iran but that didn't work out as Iran asked for Asiatic lions in exchange which India refused.

The introduction of the African cheetah has several issues. It is an exotic/alien species and we can't really be sure how their introduction will influence the native predatory species. The claims made by the government authorities regarding the cheetah's ecological role as a top predator seems far-fetched. The other problem is that the commitment for continuous monitoring of the cheetahs and their habitat is highly doubtful as it would require immense resources. We also need to ask the question why India is investing so much on an exotic animal rather than prioritizing another Indian one such as the Asiatic lion, which is restricted only to the state of Gujarat, has a poor gene pool and therefore vulnerable to extinction.

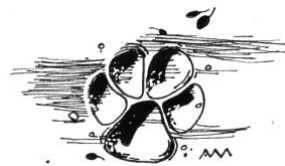
The shortage of space is another big issue. Cheetahs are known to live in low densities and thus individuals tend to have large home ranges sometimes ranging from 100 sq.km to 800 sq.km. Kuno National Park is roughly 750 sq.km. Considering their home range, it's highly possible that they might wander outside the park and face threat from feral dogs or poisoning by the locals. Hence strong enforcement mechanisms to curb

poaching would have to be put in place which still hasn't been discussed.

As per Dr. Ravi Chellam, who has been a staunch critic of the move, the introduction is nothing but a vanity project for symbolic reasons and is a diversionary tactic to move the attention away from far more critical conservation issues.

I feel our urgent priority should be to relocate Asiatic lions from Gujarat to Kuno which was originally supposed to be reserved for them as per a Supreme Court order from 2013. Our resources must be spent on reviving India's habitats and wildlife instead of making an alien species a national priority.

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