

No more resorts near Corbett: Ramesh

Minister blames land mafia for tiger deaths at reserve

Gyan Varma, NEW DELHI

The environment ministry is worried about luxury resorts mushrooming around Jim Corbett tiger reserve and wants to stop more from coming up. In 1991, there were only six such resorts around Corbett, but at present there are 74.

Environment minister Jairam Ramesh recently said the growing influence of land mafia near the reserve was one of the major reasons for tiger deaths and rise in cases of man-animal conflict. He has also written to Uttarakhand chief minister Ramesh Pokhriyal not to permit any more resorts around Corbett. Ramesh has also persuaded Manmohan Singh to monitor whether state governments are taking steps to protect the sanctity of reserves. "He

[Singh] has agreed to take up the matter with the chief ministers of various states, especially Uttarakhand," the minister said.

According to the national tiger conservation authority, 11 tigers died in January and February this

year. However, 2009 proved to be the bloodiest year for big cats, when 66 of them lost their lives. Of these, 46 died inside the reserves and 20 in adjoining areas. Ministry sources said there could be a bigger conspiracy behind the deaths — land mafia or local politicians and businessmen want the tiger population to dwindle so the land can be used for mining or construction.

In his letter to the Uttarakhand chief minister, Jairam Ramesh has also asked the state government to notify the buffer area in the reserve so that people living in them can be compensated if their cattle are killed or crops destroyed by animals. "Retaliatory killing is on the rise in Corbett. Sometimes tigers kill cattle belonging to people living in the reserves and they choose to retaliate," the officer said.

1st national park

Corbett National Park started as Hailey National Park in 1936. It was renamed after Jim Corbett in 1955-56. It is India's oldest national park and one of the nine tiger reserves created at the launch of Project Tiger in 1973. It has over 585 species of birds and 488 species of plants. More than 70,000 people visit it every season.

Now, a department dedicated to forests, wildlife

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With threat to the wildlife and forests having reached a critical stage in the country, prime minister Manmohan Singh has decided to set up a dedicated department to save them.

For a long time, animal rights activists had been pushing the government to set up such a department. Their appeal was finally heeded to at the meeting of the National Board for Wildlife on March 18.

"The objective is to strengthen field formation at the state level. The department will not be a Delhi based set up of bureaucrats. Three field officers will soon be posted in Nagpur, Kolkata and Bangalore," Jairam Ramesh, minister for environment and forests, said.

Senior officials in the ministry said new recruits in the Indian Forest Service would now get an opportunity to specialise in issues relating to wildlife and forests and they would be allowed to spend more time on the field for research.

"New people joining the environment and forest ministry would be given a choice to specialise in wildlife and forests. They would also get more time to spend on field and do research," an officer said.

Ramesh also said his ministry requires around Rs1,000 crore to relocate 80,000 families living in various reserve forests. So far, only 3,000 have agreed to move out and accept compensation, he said. The ministry would need the money in a span of seven years to convince the remaining 77,000 families to settle outside the reserves.

