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Tiger count in south states this month

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THE National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA) will start conducting its annual estimation of tigers in Kawal and Nagarjunasagar-Srisailem tiger reserve (NSTR) along with other tiger reserves in southern states later this month.

For Kawal tiger reserve where at least four to six tigers are known to exist, it is the moment of truth. Tribals, who are opposed to the new tiger reserve because they may be asked to relocate, claim that there are no tigers there, and are protesting and creating hurdles for the tiger reserve. Forest officials

say that they will pay special attention to Kawal during the exercise to prove that it is home for a few tigers.

Camera traps and unofficial estimation in the NSTR indicated the presence of new tigers last October. The total tiger population in the reserve is estimated to be 70 to 90, including several cubs.

A two-day training camp for field officers and forest officials of southern states starts at Bandipur on January 4. Known as Phase IV of All India Tiger Estimation, the decision to monitor tiger populations annually, instead of once every four years, was taken in May last year. Phase IV of the All India Tiger Estimation is an

exercise in intensive, annual monitoring of source tiger populations in 41 reserves. Hundreds of cameras will be placed for 45 to 60 days at a gap of 1 km to identify and record tigers.

Field officers will also use traditional methods like tracking pugmarks. The latest models of camera traps and estimation methods have been developed by Dr K Ullas Karanth of Wild Conservation Society (India).

Chief Conservator of Forests (Project Tiger) A K Naik says the estimation of tigers will now be conducted specifically in reserves every year. "The practice of census conducted in all wildlife sanctuaries and national parks

will be conducted every four years as usual but in tiger zones, estimation will be conducted annually from now," Naik said. Besides tigers, the condition and health of the habitat and ecosystem, and availability of prey base and prey population will also be taken into account.

The NTCA is providing necessary equipment and has allotted Rs 35 lakh grant this year to conduct the exercise. Besides forest officers, external experts who will monitor the estimation exercise are also being appointed. Imran Siddiqui of Hyderabad Tiger Conservation Society has been appointed as outside expert for Andhra Pradesh.