

TN begins work on eco-councils in tiger buffer zones

Aim Is To Wean Away Tribals From Depending On Forests

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Chennai: It is a move that may officially recognise the value of unsung heroes who know their forests best — villagers living in and around reserve forests who are otherwise at the receiving end of wildlife protection policies.

The Tamil Nadu government has begun to implement what it calls eco-development councils consisting of only villagers who live near tiger reserves, like several other states in the country. It's to ease trouble in the creation of tiger reserve buffer zones following directives from the Union government, and a kind of MoU with villagers, and a requirement for the implementation of Forest Rights Act 2006 and

the Wildlife Act where the role of forest-dwellers is viewed as important, and their rights protected.

The department enlists help from tribals and villagers to prevent forest fires, tree-felling and poaching. In return, it helps develop roads, provide sanitation and drinking water, besides compensating farmers whose crops are damaged by tigers. "We facilitate the economic revival of the village, so that villagers do not depend on forests for their needs. We will provide them loans for self-sufficiency," says a senior wildlife official.

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh had in April written to five state governments urging them to create buffer zones around national parks to pro-

tect the tiger. Tamil Nadu has three tiger reserves, Tiger deaths — 18 across the country in 2010 alone — have been a cause for alarm. On the other hand, suppression of tribal rights and their access to forests while clearing forest land for mining and infrastructure projects has created dissent among villagers on the periphery of forests, and tribals against tiger reserve projects and sanctuaries.

They face the brunt of suspicion when it comes to wildlife crimes, and apathy in addressing their own needs such as sanitation and water. In times of a Maoist-infested Dantewada and Chhattisgarh where the rights of forest dwellers and tribals have been the bone of contention, activists say the approach by government officials should be about working together with tribals rather than 'charity'. They say the concept is not

PROTECTING THE BIG CATS

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new, and is good on paper, but that implementing it with due procedures, is a far cry.

Unchecked poaching of animal parts, timber mafia and reckless eco-tourism are cited as the primary reasons for dwindling tiger numbers. "We have no problems if villagers collect firewood from the

forests for survival, but the problem is when they sell this firewood. Our idea is to wean away their dependence on the forests," the senior official notes, adding that many villages have been brought under the eco-development initiative.

Buffer zones help surplus tiger populations spill over, and

ensure more space. Roadblocks in such an initiative are because of 'misgivings' among reserve periphery villagers and tribals, say government officials.

Environmentalist and founding member of Kalpavriksh Ashish Kothari notes that "the concept is good,

and comes under the purview of both Forest Rights Act and Wildlife Act. But such consultations by governments are a cursory job. Procedures are not followed, forming of committees is badly done or not done at all." Explaining this with reference to Dantewada where suppression of forest rights has eventually led to a Maoist mess, Kothari says. "If we do not want more situations like Dantewada, an 'eco-development' approach with the tribals will not work. It is a charity approach. Forest officials should instead sit with villagers and plan forest protection jointly and for this, the attitude of officials should change."

Echoing his opinion is Varghese, president of Livelihood of Peasants in Masanagudi, where such an eco-development council was formed for 17 villages. He alleges that forest department officials try to

create friction among villagers by entrusting work with their favourite NGOs besides their 'attitude problem'. "Through a whole year's talk in forming the committee, we insisted our livelihood problems such as right to grazing cattle in forests and drawing water from rivers in forest, be solved. They allowed us to draw water after initial objections, but forgot that an entire village inside the forest is off their forest dwellers' list," he complains.

Wildlife activist CR Bijoy says two things about the initiative need to be looked into — its content relating to livelihood, tourism, protection of tiger and legality of the initiative itself. "Eco Development Councils are not legally valid in the buffer zone forest areas where people who are covered under Forest Rights Act (villagers and tribals) live," he argues.

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