

Supreme Court Restricts Tiger Safari to Non-Forest Land

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Tiger Safari Latest News

- In a landmark ruling aimed at preserving India's tiger habitats, the Supreme Court has issued sweeping directions to curb ecological damage in tiger reserves.

Background of the Case

- The ruling stems from a **suo motu intervention** by the Supreme Court after reports of **unauthorised tree felling, illegal construction, and misuse of funds** surfaced within the **Jim Corbett Tiger Reserve**.
- An expert committee appointed by the Court investigated the violations and proposed detailed recommendations for ecological restoration.
- Accepting the committee's findings, the Court noted that tiger tourism, while valuable for public awareness, has often devolved into **"mass commercial tourism"** detrimental to wildlife and forest ecosystems.

- The judgment seeks to strike a balance between **ecotourism, local livelihoods, and biodiversity protection**.

Key Directives of the Supreme Court

• Tiger Safaris Only in Non-Forest Areas

- The Court categorically prohibited tiger safaris inside **core or critical tiger habitats**, directing that they may only be established on **non-forest or degraded forest land** within buffer zones.
- Further, such safaris must operate **in association with a fully functional rescue and rehabilitation centre** for tigers, catering to **conflict animals, injured, or abandoned wildlife**.

• Complete Ban on Night Tourism and Mobile Use

- Recognising the disturbance caused by human activity and noise pollution, the Court imposed a **complete ban on night tourism** within tiger reserves.
- In areas where roads pass through core tiger habitats, the Court ordered **strict night-time regulation**, prohibiting vehicular movement **from dusk to dawn**, except for **emergency or ambulance services**.
- Additionally, it directed that the **use of mobile phones** within tourism zones of core habitats be strictly prohibited to minimise noise and human interference.

• Eco-Sensitive Zone Norms for Tiger Reserves

- The Court directed that **Eco-Sensitive Zones (ESZs)** around tiger reserves must conform to the **Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEF&CC)** norms.
- Under this, the **minimum ESZ area** shall be equivalent to the **buffer or fringe area** of the tiger reserve. States were instructed to **notify ESZ boundaries within one year**, ensuring uniform protection standards nationwide.

• Regulation of Tourism Infrastructure in Buffer Zones

- The judgment mandates that all **tourism infrastructure development** in buffer areas comply with **ESZ notifications under the Environment (Protection) Act, 1986**.
- While **eco-friendly resorts** may be allowed in buffer areas, the Court emphasised that **no such establishment shall be permitted in tiger corridors**. It further recommended promoting **community-managed homestays** and **village-based ecotourism**, thereby ensuring that conservation efforts benefit local populations.

• Ban on Commercial and Industrial Activities

- The Court imposed a comprehensive ban on ecologically harmful activities in **buffer and fringe areas**, including:
 - Commercial mining and polluting industries,
 - Sawmills and hydroelectric projects,
 - Firewood extraction and tree felling without authorisation,
 - Waste discharge into natural ecosystems,
 - Use of low-flying aircraft or tourism flights, and
 - Introduction of exotic species.
- These restrictions align with the **Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972** and India's commitments under the **Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD)**.

Directions to States and Tiger Conservation Authorities

- The Court instructed all **State Governments** to:
 - **Prepare or revise the Tiger Conservation Plans** within three months.
 - **Notify core and buffer areas** within six months.
 - Establish effective monitoring systems to ensure compliance with the ruling.
- It also directed the **National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA)** to serve as the nodal agency for enforcing these directions and conducting **annual ecological audits** of tiger reserves.
- The NTCA and MoEF&CC were further asked to submit a **joint compliance report** within one year, detailing progress in implementing the Court's directives.

Significance of the Judgment

- This verdict reinforces the principle of **"ecocentric jurisprudence"**, which prioritises the intrinsic value of nature over anthropocentric interests.
- By imposing strict limits on tourism and infrastructure expansion, the Court has sought to **reverse the trend of ecological degradation** within protected areas.
- It also aligns with India's broader conservation goals under **Project Tiger (1973)**, which has helped increase the national tiger population to **3,682 as per the 2024 census**, a global success story.
- Moreover, by encouraging **community-based tourism** and **homestays**, the judgment ensures that local economies remain linked to conservation rather than exploitation.

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