

Guidelines on Religious Structures in Wildlife Sanctuaries

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Wildlife Sanctuaries Latest News

- An apex wildlife advisory body has prepared draft guidelines regulating the diversion of forest land inside wildlife sanctuaries for religious structures.

Background: Protected Areas and Legal Framework in India

- India's wildlife sanctuaries and national parks are governed under the **Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972**, which aims to protect wildlife habitats from human-induced pressures.
- Any non-forest activity within protected areas is highly regulated and generally discouraged unless it meets strict conservation criteria.
- Additionally, the **Forest (Conservation) Act, 1980**, places restrictions on the diversion of forest land for non-forest purposes.
- As per this law, forest land diversion after 1980 requires explicit approval from the central government, reinforcing the principle that ecological protection must take precedence over development or encroachment.

Role of the National Board for Wildlife

- The **Standing Committee of the National Board for Wildlife (SCNBWL)** is an apex advisory body under the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change.
- It evaluates proposals related to infrastructure and land-use changes within protected wildlife habitats.
- The Committee's recommendations play a critical role in determining whether activities within sanctuaries align with conservation objectives.
- The formulation of guidelines on religious structures falls within this mandate, given the potential ecological consequences of such constructions.

Context for Framing the Guidelines

- The issue gained prominence following a proposal involving the **Balaram Ambaji Wildlife Sanctuary in Gujarat**, where diversion of forest land was sought for a religious establishment.
- Although initial approval was granted, it was later revoked after concerns were raised about the absence of recorded forest rights and the risk of setting a precedent.
- This episode highlighted the lack of a uniform framework to assess similar proposals across States.
- It also exposed governance gaps in cases where religious sites exist within forested areas but lack legal recognition in settlement records.

Key Provisions of the Draft Guidelines

- The draft guidelines prepared by the apex wildlife body lay down the following principles:
 - **Post-1980 constructions on forest land** are to be treated as encroachments as a general rule.
 - **Regularisation of existing structures** may be considered only in exceptional cases where the State government provides a reasoned and documented justification.
 - **Expansion of religious structures** within sanctuaries is generally prohibited. Limited expansion may be allowed only if required for managing ecological conflict or essential public utilities.
 - **Case-by-case scrutiny** is mandated, with final decisions resting with the central government after ecological assessment.
- These guidelines are currently under deliberation by State governments before final adoption.

Balancing Faith, Ecology, and Governance

- India's forests often contain sacred groves, caves, and pilgrimage sites that predate modern conservation laws.
- While cultural and religious practices are constitutionally protected, they cannot override environmental safeguards in ecologically sensitive zones.
- Unchecked construction can fragment habitats, increase human-wildlife conflict, and undermine conservation goals.
- The guidelines seek to strike a balance by recognising historical presence without legitimising fresh encroachments or large-scale development.

Implications for Wildlife Conservation

- If implemented effectively, the guidelines can:
 - Prevent gradual erosion of protected areas through incremental construction.
 - Establish uniform standards for States when dealing with sensitive land diversion requests.
 - Strengthen the legal position of conservation authorities in resisting non-essential activities inside sanctuaries.
- However, inconsistent enforcement or political pressure could dilute their impact, making monitoring and transparency crucial.

Source: TH

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