

Govt paves way for ecotourism in forest areas; experts remain wary

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The National Board for Wildlife has approved 'Guidelines on Ecotourism in Forest and Wildlife Areas 2021' in its latest meeting held on June 11 making way for ecotourism projects inside notified forest areas.

Minutes of the NBWL meeting published on the union environment ministry's Parivesh website last week stated that the ministry had held all consultations regarding the guidelines following which it had been finalised. A list of protected areas where ecotourism can be developed has also been appended to the guidelines. The guidelines are however not in public domain yet.

After listening to the salient features of the ecotourism guidelines, NBWL approved them. In a NBWL meeting dated March 8, 2021 the ministry had briefed NBWL that these guidelines are aimed at promoting better understanding of nature and wildlife conservation while generating income and opportunities for the local communities in an "ecologically, culturally and economically sustainable manner."

The objectives of the guidelines include promotion of low impact nature tourism, traditional ecological knowledge and heritage values of India's wilderness, engagement of local communities in nature tourism, partnerships amongst various stakeholders and finally enhancing the potential of India as a "global eco-tourism destination."

The environment ministry's forest advisory committee during one of its meetings in February eased norms for ecotourism projects by allowing them to build "non-permanent" structures in protected areas without permission from the central government. This was also to facilitate eco-tourism opportunities in notified forest and wildlife reserves. The FAC had decided that only construction of permanent structures will be considered to be "non-forestry" activity and require prior approval of the central government but no central government approval is required for other ecotourism activities involving non-permanent constructions.

Environmental and wildlife experts had raised several concerns with a boost to ecotourism in sensitive forest areas. Ecotourism activities can include creation of temporary or permanent infrastructure which can cause fragmentation of forest areas as well as can disturb both livelihood use and areas important for wildlife, they had said. There has been no public consultation on these guidelines yet.

"These guidelines have been in the pipeline for three years now. What has come out after consulting various legal and wildlife experts is not as radical as we had expected. But what we can say for now is that the guidelines are to benefit locals. There is likely to be some provisions of benefit sharing with forest management committees. It will help their economic condition and generate revenue as well," said a senior environment ministry official who declined to be quoted.

Meanwhile the Ministry of Tribal Affairs and Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change have jointly decided to give more powers to the tribal communities in managing the forest resources, a statement from MoEFCC said. A joint statement to this effect will be released on Tuesday. Tribal Affairs minister, Arjun Munda and environment minister, Prakash Javadekar will make the statement on effective implementation of the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006.

An ecotourism policy should not create the justification to fragment ecologically sensitive habitats and extinguish existing use rights. It also cannot be designed to merely monetise nature for exclusionary, extractive and elite tourism. We live in a post covid, climate change compromised world, which no policy affecting natural resource use, including for tourism and recreation, can ignore," said Kanchi Kohli, legal researcher, Centre for Policy Research.

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