

## **Karnataka forest department recommends environment, wildlife clearances for tourism development at Jog Falls**

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In a major development, the Karnataka forest department has recommended that Jog Management Authority should get prior environment and wildlife clearances for a proposed tourism development project at the Jog Falls area in the Shivamogga District.

It is important to note that the recommendation is not just for the five-star hotel proposal for which forest diversion was sought but also for the mega tourism activities proposed on the revenue land. The recommendation came in response to the objections raised by wildlife conservationist Giridhar Kulkarni.

KB Shivakumar, deputy commissioner (Shivamogga) and chief executive officer, Jog Management Authority (user agency), had submitted a proposal for diversion of 0.8536 hectares of forest land in Nadawada Talakalale village, Sagar taluk for the construction of a five-star hotel in place of the existing PWD guest house.

The Karnataka forest department also recommended the proposal and forwarded the proposal to the state government on July 14, 2021, requesting to move the proposal to the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEF&CC) for according 'in-principle' approval under Forest (Conservation) Act, 1980.

Kulkarni submitted detailed objections on July 26, 2021, to the state government, Karnataka Biodiversity Board, Karnataka forest department and the integrated regional office of the environment ministry, requesting to reject the proposal stating it is against the provisions of the Forest (Conservation) Act, 1980. He also mentioned that a similar proposal at the same place was rejected by the ministry in 2014 in the interest of forest conservation. He further highlighted that the state government had allotted Rs 185 crore to the user agency to construct a five-star hotel, ropeway and other tourism activities in the area but the present proposal submitted by the user agency seeking forest diversion is for constructing the five-star hotel only.

"The other tourism activities proposed on non-forest land too need environment and wildlife clearances from the standing committee of National Board for Wildlife as per EIA Notification, 2006, and guidelines issued by the MoEF&CC," the objections read.

The user agency also sought 18.74 acres of land (excluding the area proposed for construction of a five-star hotel) to carry out tourism developmental activities.

Based on the objections raised by Kulkarni, the environment ministry in August 2021 wrote to the state government to take appropriate action as per the extant rules and regulations. The state government in September 2021 sought a detailed response from the forest department directing it to look into the objections.

Replying to the state government, the office of the principal chief conservator of forests (head of forest force) agreed to the objections raised by Kulkarni. The project has however been recommended.

Official documents accessed by The Indian Express reveal that on February 21 former principal chief conservator of forests (PCCF) Sanjai Mohan in his letter to the office of additional chief secretary (forest, ecology and environment) stated that Jog Management Authority, Shivamogga should seek environment clearance and National Board for Wildlife standing committee clearance before commencing the construction of the five-star hotel near Jog Falls. "The forest land proposed for diversion is situated within 10 km from the boundary of the Sharavathi Valley lion-tailed macaque sanctuary. Though the eco-sensitive zone for the sanctuary has not yet been notified and the

process of notifying the eco-sensitive zone (ESZ) is in progress, in the judgment passed by the Supreme Court of India in 2006, it was stated that for any wildlife Sanctuary, if ESZ has not been notified, in such situation the area within 10 km from the boundary of the sanctuary should be deemed as ESZ by default,” the letter read.

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