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## Who will watch the forests?

/ Jul 18, 2024, 06.00 AM IST



### **Wildlife at risk with just 185 of 1,892 posts of forest watchers filled in state**

Going by the number of regular frontline staff in Karnataka Forest Department (KFD), wildlife in the state are sitting ducks for poachers.

According to information provided by KFD, the number of occupied posts of forest watchers is at an all-time low. While the total

number of sanctioned posts is 1,892, only 185 (less than 10%) are occupied so far, leaving more than 90% of positions vacant.

In 2016-17, while the department had 1,177 sanctioned posts for forest watchers, 981 were occupied (83%). However, this number has continued to drop since then.

In 2018-19, while 56% of the positions were occupied, it went down to 37% in 2020-21, followed by 17% of the posts occupied in 2021-22 and 13% in 2022-23 (out of 1892 sanctioned posts, 241 were occupied and 1,651 were vacant).

Experts say the large number of vacancies points to the apathy of the state government in protecting our forests and wildlife. Forest watchers are frontline personnel who guard our forests against activities that endanger the forest and its inhabitants and pose a threat to the forest ecosystem such as forest fires, wildlife poaching, timber smuggling, etc.

“Forest watchers, though at the lowest rank in the department, are the foot soldiers and form the most important workforce. They patrol on foot and play an important role in anti-poaching camps by reporting any untoward incidents such as the smuggling of timber or poaching of wildlife.

Thus, so many vacant positions of full-time forest watchers deployed by KFD will surely hurt the protection and conservation activities,” said a city-based wildlife conservationist.

### **Recruitments going on**

KFD officials informed BM that the recruitment of forest watchers in phases is going on.

“We have almost completed the recruitment process of 310 watchers and 300 of them will be joining us soon.

As we speak, their document verification process is going on. We are recruiting people in phases as filling up all vacancies at one go will exert a lot of pressure on resources. Moreover, all incumbents are required to have at least two promotions.

This will not be feasible given all vacancies are filled simultaneously. So it is important that hiring is done in batches,” said Brijesh Kumar Dikshit, Principal Chief Conservator of Forests and Head of Forest Force, KFD.

Some wildlife activists have highlighted that the department’s decision to bring in regular staff based on educational qualifications is proving to be discriminatory against the temporary forest watchers that have been hired through private agencies over the last many years.

“The department has outsourced nearly 500 forest watchers through a private agency. They are hired on petty cash as temporary

watchers. Some of them have been serving the department for more than a decade. However, since new watchers are being hired as regular staff, the plan is to oust the temporary watchers.

Lack of educational qualification is the reason that the department and the government cite to replace them. However, group D staff has gathered invaluable knowledge through their years of experience.

The government must put aside the educational qualification criteria for selective experienced temporary watchers and bring them in as regular staff,” said Joseph Hoover, former State Board of Wildlife member and founder of the United Conservation Movement and Charitable Trust.