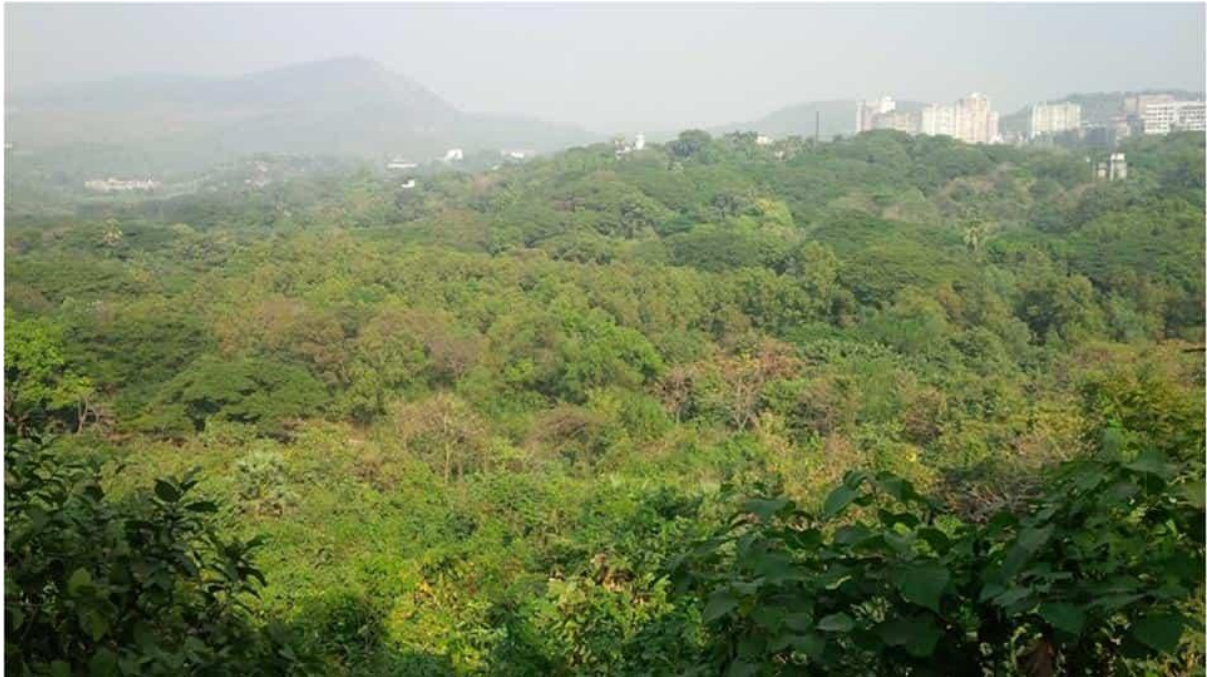


Aarey: Final proposal allocates 329 ha forest soon to be part of SGNP

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A final proposal for reserved forest declaration has been vetted and submitted to the Maharashtra government for the allocation of 328.9 hectare (ha) within Aarey as a reserved forest under the Indian Forest Act.(Vanashakti)

An area twice the size of what was excluded (165 hectare) from Aarey forest within the protected buffer zone of Mumbai's Sanjay Gandhi National Park (SGNP) in December 2016 will soon be part of the park. A final proposal for reserved forest declaration has been vetted and submitted to the Maharashtra government for the allocation of 328.9 hectare (ha) within Aarey as a reserved forest under the Indian Forest Act. "The process to declare it is underway and should be completed over the next 15 days," said Milind Mhaiskar, principal secretary (forests).

HT has seen an unsigned draft of the final proposal along with a map of the proposed green zone. The reserved forest area encompasses 107 land parcels from Aarey (111.3 ha), Goregaon (71.6 ha), Maroshi (146 ha including area allotted originally for) villages under Andheri and Borivali talukas in Mumbai suburbs.

"The idea is first to declare everything that has ecosystem characteristics [biodiversity, tree cover etc] of a forest as reserved forest area," said Aaditya Thackeray, the state environment minister. "Based on our on-ground survey undertaken two weeks ago, we included green zones having open areas and forest-like cover while leaving out roads, built-up structures, and lands given to state agencies such as the animal husbandry department..."

Following the declaration, a settlement officer would survey the area followed by suggestions and objections pertaining to land rights. Finally, the state would notify the forest.

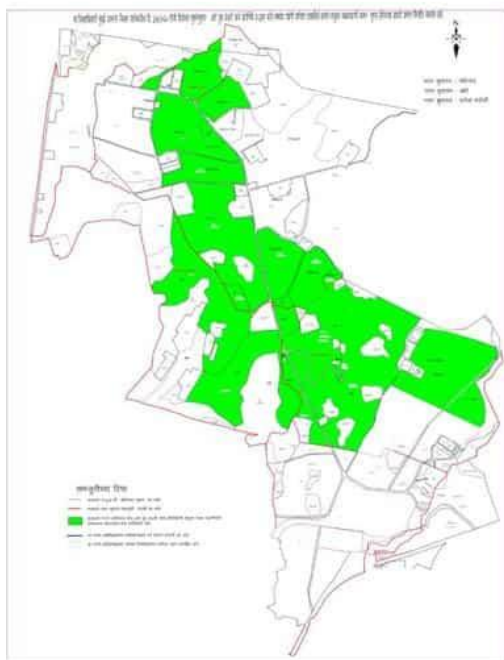
Thackeray said based on public hearings and ensuring rights of Aarey's local residents are intact, the final area would be plus-minus 20 ha if at all any land rights issues arise.

An area of 40.46 ha previously slotted for the zoo will be declared reserved forest first, said Mhaiskar. "To ensure continuity, the overall notification will be issued together. Subsequently, the land will be handed over to SGNP making it a part of the national park."

The total expanse of SGNP would be increased by 3.5 sq km from the existing 103 sq km, said G Mallikarjuna, the park's conservator. "The move will enhance protection of leopards dispersing from SGNP to Aarey," he said. Aarey has about six to seven leopards.

The Centre in December 2016 excluded 165 ha of 1,287 ha of Aarey from SGNP's eco-sensitive zone to allow construction, including a Metro car shed following a state government proposal.

Stalin D, director, Vanashakti, an NGO, welcomed the state government's latest move as superb and added it will remove 165 ha from needless destruction. "We await phase two of this protection where the entire Aarey will be preserved for future generations."



A map of the reserved forest area to be declared in Aarey. (Sourced)

Of the 165 ha, projects slotted across 161.6 ha include Metro Bhawan, a zoological park, an encroachment rehabilitation project, a regional transport office among others.

With the proposed declaration, only metro related and allied projects would remain along the peripheral areas of the green lung. "Our original proposal was for over 600 acres [242 ha]," said Mhaiskar. He added the additional 81 ha came from the area slotted for the zoo which was not needed. "A zoo is already in Byculla and cannot be established inside a reserved forest. Secondly, we found that the 90-ha area allotted for an encroachment rehabilitation project had rich biodiversity and it was not feasible to shift people there. Thus, almost 200 acres were freed up."

Mhaiskar clarified the area for the encroachment rehabilitation project was shifted towards the periphery of the green lung. "All other infrastructures or projects are outside the proposed reserved forest.'

Thackeray said recognising Aarey as a forest was reclamation in a better way. "Mumbai is probably the only city in the world where we have such an area thriving with flora and fauna actively. Some lesser species are endemic. It is not just about passion, but duty and commitment to ensure that we do everything we can to protect such natural heritage we have been blessed with," he said.

He thanked chief minister Uddhav Thackeray for his commitment, and also dairy development minister Sunil Kedar for taking the lead in protecting Aarey.

Tauseef Patel, a resident of Aarey's Unit-9, said they have been asked to give up their home, where they have been staying for over four generations since the 1950s, and relocate to another in the

same unit. "The land is being taken over for the Metro Bhawan construction," said Patel, a dairy farmer.

Mumbai Metropolitan Region Development Authority (MMRDA) officials confirmed they would soon commence constructions including of the 32-storey Metro Bhawan across 28.17 acres in Aarey. "We are awaiting the final environment clearance from the Centre following which construction will commence," said BG Pawar, joint metropolitan commissioner, MMRDA. "The rehabilitation for occupants is being done after an agreement with the Aarey dairy department and MMRDA will bear the construction cost of their new structures as per the agreement."

Source: <https://www.hindustantimes.com/environment/aarey-final-proposal-allocates-329-ha-forest-soon-to-be-part-of-sgnp/story-IErpezJzOJxHlwCIBZSYqN.html>