

**Build mangrove cells across all coastal states: Environment ministry panel**

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The Expert Appraisal Committee (EAC) of the Ministry of Environment and Forests for coastal regulation zone (CRZ) clearances has recommended the formation of a mangrove cell across all coastal states, similar to Maharashtra, for better protection of mangroves. Mangroves are salt-tolerant plants, trees, shrubs or ground fern of tropical and subtropical intertidal regions of the world. While being a breeding ground for a variety of marine animals, they also act as a natural buffer against storm surges, cyclones and sea level rise.

Considering the need for their conservation, a dedicated cell under the forest department can help safeguard mangrove forest patches and appraise planned projects around them better through site verification on affected mangrove trees, the EAC said, adding, "In Maharashtra, a mangrove conservation cell administered by the forest department is effectively functioning and a similar model can be adopted by other coastal state governments."

A formal recommendation was sent to the Union environment ministry last week.

"The committee desired that the matter can be looked into by the Ministry of Environment, Forests and Climate Change and in the interest of mangrove conservation, which plays a major role specially during extreme events in coastal areas, the coastal state governments or union territories' administration may be requested to develop such dedicated mangrove conservation efforts," read the minutes. This is a well-established model of the Maharashtra government where there is a recognised institutional framework constituted in protecting mangrove cover, said Deepak Apte, chairman, EAC (CRZ).

"We have been highlighting this since our very first meeting and the Centre should take this forward in light of coastal and marine conservation. The Maharashtra model has appropriate accountability with the cell headed by a high ranking forest officer further reporting to the chief wildlife warden, and governing council state secretaries," said Apte. The EAC made its latest recommendation while

assessing the feasibility of a Rs 2286 crore six-lane highway project in Kerala (Talapady to Nileschwaram section of NH-66) that involved the loss of 266 mangrove trees.

According to the Forest Survey of India, the country has 4,975 sq. km of mangrove cover. West Bengal (majorly Sunderbans) has maximum cover 2,112 sq km followed by Gujarat 1,177 sq km, Andaman and Nicobar Islands 616 sq km, Andhra Pradesh 404 sq km, Maharashtra 320 sq km, and Odisha 251 sq km, among major regions with mangrove forests.

Maharashtra's mangrove cell was constituted in 2012 based on an order passed by the Bombay high court in 2005 banning mangrove destruction across the state and construction within 50 m of trees. Over eight years, the cell recruited staff for on-ground surveillance. It now has 70 forest guards across six Konkan districts, 13 round officers, and a special team engaged in tackling mangrove destruction across Mumbai, Navi Mumbai and Thane called the Mumbai Mangrove Conservation Unit (MMCU) with 108 guards alone and a team of senior forest officers. Additionally, there is one range forest officer across all other districts including Palghar, Raigad, Ratnagiri and Sindhudurg.

The cell is responsible for the declaration and protection of the 16.9 sq km Thane Creek Flamingo Sanctuary and the protection of the Malvan Marine Sanctuary. It recently proposed the 2,011 sq km Angria Bank, a submerged plateau 105 km (56.7 nautical miles) off Malvan in the Sindhudurg, as a protected area, which was approved by the State Board of Wildlife last month. The state constituted the Mangrove and Marine Biodiversity Conservation Foundation in 2015, an autonomous body that assists the mangrove cell in coastal marine conservation through research projects with mangrove cell chief as its executive director. Over five years, the foundation has undertaken numerous research projects to improve the livelihood of coastal communities as well as increase awareness and capacity building through marine biodiversity research along the Konkan coast.

According to mangrove cell officials, the foundation is registered as a society where funds are allocated to offset environmental implications by project proponents as one of the conditions during wildlife clearance (mostly 2% of total project cost) issued by the National Board of Wildlife.

"This money is sent to fixed deposits and the foundation uses the interest to fund its activities thereby not depending on government funds at all," a forest official said. Apte added, "This is an effective mechanism wherein instead of companies spending money on their own (where effectiveness cannot be monitored), funds are allocated either for mangrove conservation or marine research through annual plans developed by this foundation. Thus, funds to offset environmental impacts for projects are channelised through a well-established structure governed ultimately by the state for coastal and climatic resilience."

Over the eight years since the inception of the cell and five years since the foundation was constituted, Maharashtra recorded the highest increase in mangrove cover (37%) across India between 2015 (222 sq km) and 2017 (304 sq km), and second highest increase in mangrove cover in India (by another 16 sq km) between 2017 and 2019.

### **First state to declare its own mangrove state tree**

Maharashtra is set to become the first coastal state to declare a state mangrove tree species - *Sonneratia alba* or mangrove apple - based on a proposal by the mangrove cell, which was approved by the State Board of Wildlife during a meeting last month.

The state is likely to publish the formal government resolution on the decision later this month. Known as White Chippi in Marathi, *Sonneratia alba* grow up to five feet with white flowers having a pink base, and bear distinct green apples as fruits used to make pickles. They often grow on newly formed mudflats playing an important role in combating land erosion.

Source: <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/build-mangrove-cells-across-all-coastal-states-environment-ministry-panel/story-rWQhXgqZQW2ED5WcrnveNI.html>