

COIMBATORE

Calls grow to bring municipal forests bordering Ooty under control of forest department

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According to sources in the forest department, there are believed to be at least two tigers, five leopards and at least two packs of wild dogs inhabiting the municipal forests surrounding Udhagamandalam town



Recent records of tigers, Asiatic wild dogs, leopards and sloth bears in wooded areas designated as “municipal forests” have strengthened the demands of conservationists to bring them under the control of the forest department.

According to forest department officials, these forests are under the control of the Udhagamandalam Municipality and the revenue department, and encompass patches of forest that are contiguous with other designated reserve forests, facilitating the movement of wildlife and providing crucial habitats for rare and endangered species to expand into.

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surrounding Udhagamandalam town.

N. Sadiq Ali, Founder of the Wildlife and Nature Conservation Trust (WNCT), said that these municipal forests are usually located around artificial water bodies which serve as water sources for Udhagamandalam Town. “The problem with this is that there is very little control over trespassing by members of the public, who fish in the water bodies, litter and could even be poaching wildlife. In addition, there is a high probability of negative human-animal interactions in these areas as these forests are home to large predators,” said Mr. Ali.



Marlimumd municipality reserve forest at Udhagamandalam | Photo Credit: SATHYAMOORTHY M

Invaluable buffer for wildlife

The Marlimumd municipal forest is contiguous with the Wenlock Downs reserve forest and Doddabetta, while other municipal forests such as Tiger Hill are also contiguous with declared reserve forests, said conservationists, who state that the municipal forests are now acting as an invaluable buffer for wildlife which are pushed out of traditional habitats due to competition with other animals.

“For instance, tigers from the Sigur, such as an older male, may get pushed out from Mudumalai and make their way up the slopes to Marlimumd and manage to find enough prey to sustain themselves without turning into animals having negative interactions with humans,” said a top forest department official from the Nilgiris division.

To protect these forests, conservationists state that it is imperative that they are handed over to the forest department to ensure that the forests are not threatened by development work or even construction of private properties too close to these habitats.

Protection of forest unclear

When contacted, Conservator of Forests (Nilgiris), D. Venkatesh, said that animals living in these habitats are protected under the Wildlife Protection Act, but said that the protections to the forest itself is slightly unclear. "The Wildlife Protection Act extends to all wildlife both within and outside reserve forests, but municipal forests are under the control of the revenue department. But as they are called 'forests,' the Forest (Conservation) Act should be applicable," he said.

On the other hand, Mr. Venkatesh said that Tamil Nadu Forest Act (TNFA) will extend to only lands declared under Section 16 and Section 26 of the TNFA, with the district collector and the government having the power to notify these areas respectively.

Since the recent sightings of tigers and leopards in these forests, steps are being taken to prevent people from entering these habitats and to fence off certain portions, officials from the Nilgiris forest division stated.

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