

Forest Department road endangers core KMTR habitat: activists

But officials insist they only cleared the '*katcha*' road to have better access for officials to the core areas for better surveillance

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A road laid by the Forest Department with heavy machinery inside the core, inviolate habitats of the Kalakkad Mundanthurai Tiger Reserve (KMTR) in Tirunelveli district could endanger its very existence, activists say.

While KMTR officials insist that they were only clearing the '*katcha*' road to have better access for Forest Department officials to the core areas for better surveillance and that no heavy machinery was used, activists point out that for decades, foresters have only travelled by foot and not on jeeps, and this could set off a dangerous trend.

Photographs accessed by *The Hindu* show that bulldozers are being used to lay the road. The road was being laid in gross violation of the Forest (Conservation) Act and the Wildlife Protection Act. The new road and the resultant vehicular movement could endanger the KMTR's core and threaten its



Before and after: Photographs accessed by *The Hindu* show that bulldozers are being used to lay the road.

very survival, and activists have called for a halt to this activity.

KMTR was declared a tiger reserve in 1988, the first in

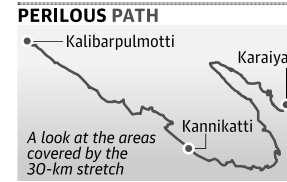
Tamil Nadu. It has been identified as a Type-I tiger conservation unit representing the tropical moist evergreen forests. It also forms part of the

inter-State Agasthiyarmalai Biosphere Reserve, declared one of the plant diversity centres by UNESCO.

It was also declared the Regional Centre of Endemism in the Indian subcontinent. There are 2,255 species of Angiosperms so far recorded from the KMTR, including 448 species endemic to the Western Ghats, in addition to 150 species that are strictly endemic to the Agasthiyarmalai, say researchers working in the reserve.

According to activists, this core habitat is one of the highly protected areas with the least entry points. One has to cross the Papanasam checkpoint and reach the Mundanthurai plateau and thereon travel to Servalar and the Karaiyar dam inside the core. The vehicular movement is usually restricted up to the dam, as *pucca* roads have been laid only up to that. Only 5 kani tribal settlements are present in the core area. There are very few elephant areas in the reserve.

About 10 years ago, trek-



ing was also stopped. There are only patrolling/combing routes available from the Karaiyar dam (the Mundanthurai plateau) to Kalivarpul until recently, which lead to Bomacadu (Kerala border). The forest staff and the anti-poaching watchers were patrolling the forest by foot, say activists.

Importantly, activists and researchers said these were the few tropical evergreen patches left in the country, free from any man-made interventions and serving as a water catchment for the perennial Tamirabharani river. The access to the forest was only available to the Kani tribals of the area and the forest staff patrolling the region.

Alleging that heavy machinery was being operated now to clear rainforest patch along Karaiyar-Kannikatti-

Kalivarpul Mottai for 30 km, the activists say such clearing would amount to loss of biodiversity, encourage a larger vehicular movement and allow easy access to poachers and even Maoist infiltration. And for an area that had no road entry, creating a road by clearing the forest inside the core area raises suspicion, they add. "Another reason for laying the road could be to facilitate access for high-profile pilgrims to the Agasthiyar temple in the peak in vehicles. Now they have to trek," says an activist, requesting anonymity.

KMTR field director Yogesh Singh did not react and said the local officer (a deputy director) would answer. KMTR deputy director (Ambasamudram division) Kommu Omkaram denied that heavy equipment was used to lay roads in the core zone between the Papanasam dam and Kalibar Pullmottai. The 30-km '*katcha*' road connecting the border with Kerala through the dense jungle would usually be maintained to ensure the movement of

the vehicles of KMTR officials to reach the spots within the shortest possible time.

"Since this area would witness heavy winds throughout the year, uprooting of huge trees is quite usual, and would make our travel inside the core zone tougher. Even then we don't lay '*pucca* roads' in this area fearing that it would encourage the entry of outsiders. We used to remove only periodically the wild growth that would cover the '*katcha*' roads," he said.

A retired forest official, a native of the region, said forest officials should continue to trek the region and not lay new roads for them to travel in jeeps. The road plan should be immediately abandoned. Initially, forest officials would only say they would travel on the route. Then the political pressure would make them open up the road for more people. Eventually, there would be a demand for the road to connect to Kerala. This road threatens the very existence of KMTR, he warned.