

Forest cover widens, but eco-sensitive zones shrink

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Kolhapur: The ministry of environment, forests and climate change has extended the boundaries of the Radhananagri wildlife sanctuary in Kolhapur, and the extended areas will be treated as eco-sensitive zones, putting restrictions on certain activities. According to the notification, the ministry has reduced the area of eco-sensitive zones when compared to the original proposal. However, some activities have been completely prohibited, though infrastructure works will be allowed in the new zone.

The notification, issued on October 15, has added a total of 41 villages from Kolhapur and neighbouring Sindhudurg district to the sanctuary. Of these, 26 villages are from Radhanagari taluka of Kolhapur district and 15 are from Sindhudurg district. The villages in Sindhudurg district are in Kudal and Kankavli talukas.

The notification states that the decision was taken as the existing Radhanagari sanctuary was close to human habitation and it was necessary to control ongoing developmental activities to ensure proper safeguards to the sanctuary.

Clement Ben, chief conservator of forest, Kolhapur circle, said the established residential properties won't be disturbed. The main prohibition will be for mining and pollution-causing industries. "With the final notification of Radhanagari Wildlife Sanctuary being published, the deemed eco-sensitive zone of 10 km will cease to exist. The execution of development projects may be smooth outside the notified area," he said.

He added that a committee to implement the ESZ procedure will be formed under the district collectors of Kolhapur and Sindhudurg and comprise forest department officials.

In July, 2019, the ministry has called for suggestions and objections over its proposal to increase the area of Radhanagari sanctuary.

According to the original proposal, the ministry has planned to extend the area of Radhanagari sanctuary by ten km aerial

distance. However, it was opposed by the residents. According to the notification, the eco sensitive zone of the sanctuary has been increased by 200 meter to six km.

The state government has now been asked to prepare a master zonal plan of the newly added eco sensitive zone within a period of two years in consultation local people. It has also said that the master plan should not affect existing structures or activities, approved earlier.

The notification has listed eight activities, which will be prohibited in the newly included eco sensitive zone. Major activities, which will be banned, include mining and stone quarrying, industries causing any sort of pollution, setting up of hydro-electric projects, use of production or processing of hazardous substances, discharge of untreated effluents in natural bodies or land area, setting up of sawmills and brick kilns, use of polythene bags.

The union government, however, has allowed few activities with some regulations and restrictions. These activities are commercial hotels and resorts, any new construction, small scale non-polluting units, felling of trees and collection of forest produce.

Samrat Kerkar, founder of Bison Nature Club in Radhanagri, said, “This eco-sensitive zone will not affect local residents much as the periphery was already considered while taking any developmental projects. Now, the industrialisation or pollution causing industries will get a full stop and the residents will have to depend more now on tourism related sector. With mining ban, the wildlife conservation and environmental balance of the region will remain undisturbed.”

Several works like new wood based industry, erection of electrical poles and communication towers and infrastructure including civic amenities, widening and strengthening of the existing and new roads, tourism by flying over the zone through hot air balloon, drone, helicopter. The other major activities like movement of vehicles, ongoing agriculture and horticulture operations and establishment of large-scale commercial livestock and poultry farms by firms, corporate will be permissible within existing laws.

Radhanagari wildlife sanctuary is known for rich avifauna of about 264 species of birds, including migratory, a number of territorial birds of Indian origin. Honey buzzard, serpent eagle, hawk eagle, white bellied sea eagle are important raptors in Radhanagar. It has about 47 species of mammals, about 59 species of reptiles, 20 species of amphibian and 66 species of butterflies.