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**THE TIMES OF INDIA**

# Forest dept seeks 'critical habitat' tag for Radhanagari

Jul 21, 2022, 03:43 AM IST



Kolhapur: The forest department has submitted a proposal to the state government seeking declaration of the Radhanagari wildlife sanctuary as a “critical wildlife habitat” as the existence of wild animals here has been endangered due to the increasing human interference.

A total of 28,237.1 hectare area, comprising 29 villages, has been included in this proposal. In 1958, the 19 sqkm forest land — reserved for hunting by Rajarshi Chhatrapati Shahu Maharaj — at Radhanagari was declared the state’s first wildlife sanctuary. Later in 1985, the sanctuary was expanded to 351.1 sqkm in which 29 villages — 28 from Radhanagari tehsil and one from Gaganbawda tehsil — were included.

Abhijeet Tayshete, one of the directors of Gokul Dairy and a local of the Radhanagari area, said, “Even 37 years after the expansion, rehabilitation work is pending. In 2018, a committee was formed for this and the proposal has been made as per the committee’s report. Due to Covid-19 pandemic, this work had got sidelined. But it has again come on top as divisional forest officer Vishal Mali has issued notices to conduct gram sabhas at all the 29 villages from July 25.”

While the sanctuary area includes only forest department land and catchment areas of Radhanagari and Kalamawadi dams, the forest department has been imposing restrictions on privately owned lands from time to time. This has affected the selling and buying of lands.

“Eco-tourism will take a hit due to this decision. Owning a land in the sanctuary will become a problem for the locals if this area is brought under endangered wildlife habitat. Therefore, dissatisfaction is rising amongst the locals.” Tayshete said.

Divisional forest officer Vishal Mali told TOI: “Radhanagri serves as a link to the protected areas between Sahyadri Tiger Reserve, Mhadei National Park in Goa and Bhimgad Sanctuary and Dandeli Tiger Reserve in Karnataka. It also works as a corridor to connect many forests in South-West India.”

He added, “Meetings have been arranged at these 29 villages. The opinion of the villagers will be considered before taking any decision.”