

Helicopters ferrying pilgrims to Kedarnath disturbing wildlife

TNN | Jun 9, 2022, 04.03 AM IST



DEHRADUN: As many as nine helicopter service firms are ferrying pilgrims to the Kedarnath shrine, making several trips every day from dawn to dusk. In some cases, choppers are being flown at a low altitude to save fuel as well as ferry pilgrims faster, as per frontline forest teams who reported the issue to higher authorities.

A letter written by the DFO of KWLS, Inder Singh Negi, to the Uttarakhand Civil Aviation Development Authority (UCADA) on June 6, a copy of which is with TOI, says, "On June 3, at around 2:20 pm, a red and white helicopter in the Chopta area was ferrying pilgrims at an extremely low altitude, violating NGT directives and the Wildlife Protection Act.

The wildlife was adversely impacted as a result. " Similar violations have been observed by the helicopters that are ferrying pilgrims to Badrinath

shrine.

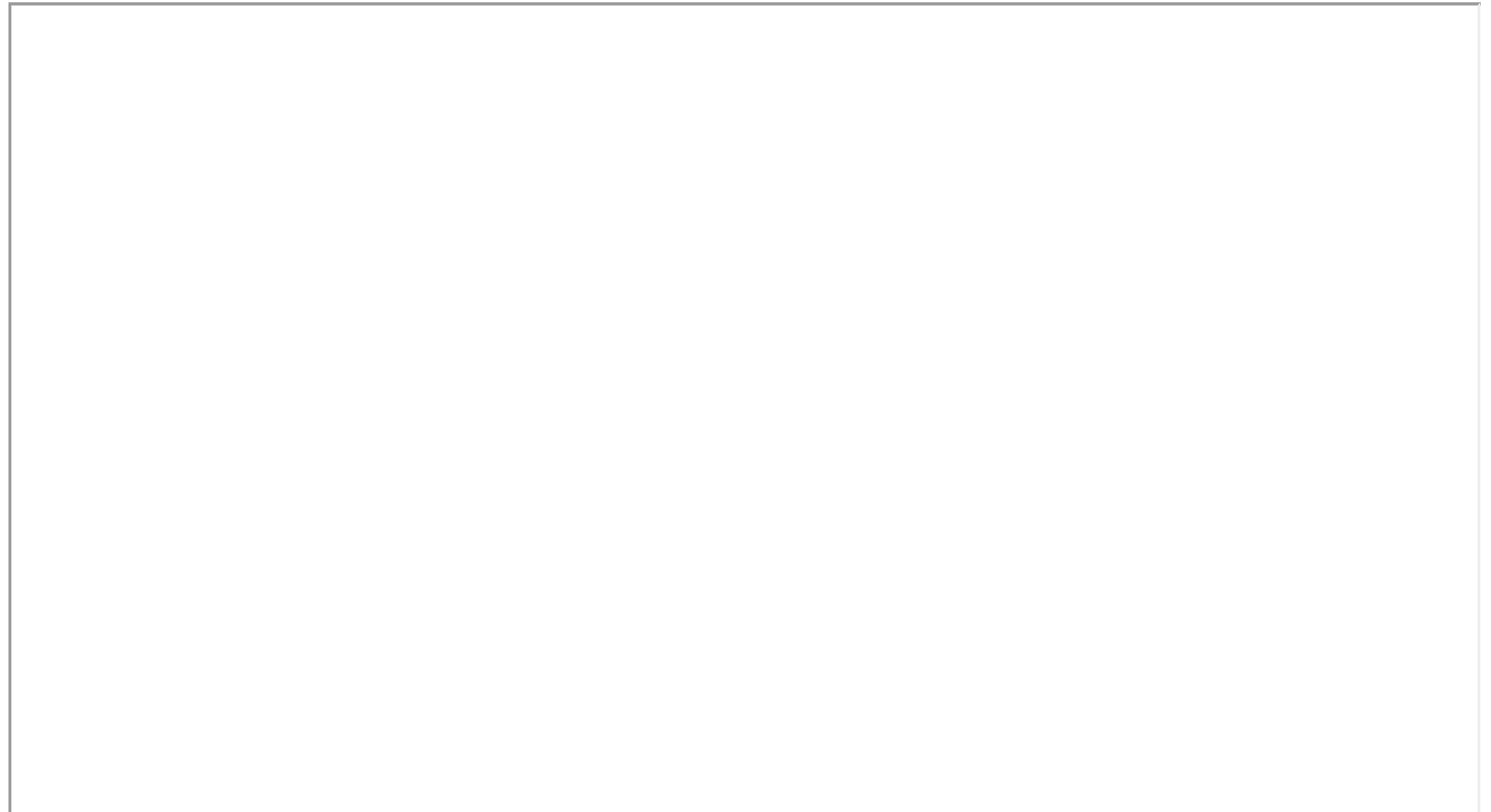
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Negi said that a complaint will be registered against heli-companies and pilots for violating NGT directions under section 27(4) (teasing or molesting any wild animals) of the Wildlife Protection Act, 1972, and relevant sections of the Wildlife (Protection) Amendment Act, 2006.

Meanwhile, returnees from the Kedarnath shrine told TOI, “Helicopters on a sunny day take off every 10 minutes. There is a race to acquire more customers and make quick money, disregarding the eco-sensitive zone’s flora and fauna.” As per estimates, almost one helicopter every 10 minutes hovers over KWLS, which is home to some of the most sensitive wildlife such as alpine musk deer, snow leopard, Himalayan thar, Himalayan Griffon, and Himalayan brown bears.



Forest officials say that these norms were flouted on the routes starting from Gopeshwar and Ukhimath, where traditionally

such problems did not arise. In fact, officials say that chopper altitudes are sometimes so low that just based on an "ocular observation", range officers at two sites have filed a complaint against an "unknown company" and its pilots for violation of NGT directions on the directions of the DFO, till the time UCADA provides details of the company and pilots.

To recall, on March 7, 2018, the NGT had directed the state government to ensure adherence to a recommendation by the Wildlife Institute of India, which said that choppers shouldn't fly at elevation levels lower than 600 m. TOI in 2020 had reported that on at least 74 occasions, choppers were flying at altitudes as low as 250 m above the sanctuary.