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# It's raining conservation reserves in state

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Nagpur: It's raining conservation reserves (CRs) in Maharashtra, but does it solve the purpose of wildlife conservation and management, especially when it has a lower protection status compared to national parks and wildlife sanctuaries.

In Maharashtra, there are 23 CRs notified till date with an area of 1,751 sqkm. These include 12 new CRs declared by chief minister Uddhav Thackeray in the 18th Maharashtra State Wildlife Board (MSWBL) meeting held on June 6.

However, as per the agenda items, apart from the existing 23 CRs, 18 more are proposed to be declared in the next MSWBL meeting slated to be held soon. This will take the tally of CRs to 41, thus making the state with the highest number of CRs in the country.

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Of the 25 CRs, 20 were declared by the MVA government in the last 2.5 years. The state also declared five new sanctuaries with an area of over 647 sqkm. But these sanctuaries include two CRs – Kolamarka and Muktai-Bhavani – that were upgraded as wildlife sanctuaries recently.

The provision for declaration of CR is given under section 36A of the Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972. The basic purpose of a CR is to protect the landscape, flora and fauna and their habitat that are adjacent to the national park and sanctuaries and those areas which link one protected area (PA) with another.



Forest officials claim management interventions like habitat management, strengthening of protection measures, soil and moisture conservation works, livelihood activities, etc. are to be done according to the approved CR management plan (CRMP).

However, these claims are just an eyewash. Even after the first three CRs were notified in 2008 (Bhorgad), 2013 (Kolamarka), and 2014 (Muktai-Bhavani), no CRMPs were prepared. Now, Kolamarka and Muktai-Bhavani have been upgraded as wildlife sanctuaries.

“The state’s intentions behind declaring CRs are good but I am not in favour of declaring tiger habitats as CRs as the tiger is a wide-ranging species and they cannot coexist with human settlements. Unless we declare these tiger-bearing areas as critical tiger habitats (CTHs), the NTCA would never provide funds,” says SBWL member Kishor Rithe.

Rithe added, “We cannot declare CRs as CTH and hence they won't bring funds from the Centre. Barring exceptions like our CM, the state usually does not provide enough financial allocation to CRs. The forest department also does not hand over these CRs to the wildlife wing and hence its management hardly sees any positive changes. So, I strongly feel that at least tiger habitats must be declared as sanctuaries.”

Gadchiroli wildlife warden Uday Patel says, “CRs will not have ESZs. Hence, mining and other detrimental projects will not be stopped. Besides, minor forest produce (MFP) and fuelwood collection, and grazing of cattle will also continue as usual. It is surprising that even tiger-bearing areas like Mogarkasa, Mahendri, and Muniya, which fall in the crucial corridors were declared as CRs. Ekara in Bramhapuri is also on the agenda.”

Rithe says many CRs that were declared are tiger-bearing areas and such areas should be critical tiger habitats (CTHs) of the future, but once you declare such areas as CRs, you cannot notify them as CTHs. There is also no provision for the relocation of villages in CRs and such areas will be managed by people.

Vijay Ghuge, who coined the Muniya CR in Nagpur district, says, “It’s more than a year since the 67sqkm area was notified but I don’t see any difference. It is a reserve forest and the age-old practices of locals like grazing, fishing, and picnicking continue. Those living on the fringes consider it as a project where their agricultural land will be acquired and they will be relocated for attractive compensation. Now, I always feel it should have been declared a sanctuary.”