

# MTR needs a plan for eco-conservation

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Chennai: The Supreme Court has given a fillip to conservation efforts in the Western Ghats by upholding the validity of a Tamil Nadu government notification declaring an elephant corridor on Sigur plateau. The apex court also formed a three-member panel to hear claims of land and resort owners.

Environmentalists feel the next step should be to draft a zonal master plan (ZMP) for Mudumalai Tiger Reserve (MTR) eco-sensitive zone, where Sigur plateau falls, and form a monitoring committee. The ZMP, prepared with inputs from departments like the pollution control board, PWD, tourism and local bodies besides the forest department, would be a ready reckoner of types of forests, man-made structures, water bodies, agricultural land and settlements if any, and provide a road map for conservation.

Last December, the ministry of environment, forest and climate change declared adjoining areas, up to 33.65km, around the MTR as an eco-sensitive zone (ESZ). The notification states that the state shall prepare a ZMP by December 2021, but there are no signs of the work.

Environmentalists feel formation of the ZMP would ensure proper enforcement of the SC order. "Tamil Nadu should prepare and notify the ZMP immediately," said B J Krishnan, former member of the Western Ghats ecology expert panel and a senior advocate who has appeared for environmental protection in multiple cases.

The issue dates back to 2009 and 2011 when the Madras high court hearing a public interest litigation alleging obstructions in the elephant corridor in the Sigur plateau ordered that all illegal resorts and unauthorised electricity connections and solar fencing in the identified corridors be removed. Private land falling under the corridor should also be taken over by the government. In July 2011, a final map of the elephant corridor falling within Sholur, Masinagudi, Hullathi and Kadanadu villages in Sigur plateau of the Nilgiris district was notified by then Nilgiris collector Archana Patnaik. As per the notification, resort owners and other private landowners should hand over their land to the collector and would receive compensation. Those living in government poramboke land would be given alternative dwelling sites or compensation as per the Forest Dwellers

Act, 2006. The land and resort owners plea was turned down by the court. Subsequently the landowners went to the Supreme Court in 2011.

Krishnan points out, "MTR eco-sensitive zone is a statutory authority constituted under Section 3 of the Environment (Protection) Act 1986. The elephant corridor is part of the zone and there should be harmony in implementing both notifications." The SC also ordered for a three-member committee to inquire into land, building and title disputes. Krishnan said the monitoring committee should be constituted before the court-appointed committee begins its study.

Environmentalists point out and officials admit that the ZMP would regulate development activities in eco-sensitive zones. Whatever regulations are drafted in the ZMP would be binding on the elephant corridor, said K K Kaushal, field director, Mudumalai Tiger Reserve, but said the government is yet to form the ZMP and the monitoring committee. Nationally too, there have been delays. According to environmentalist Bandu Dhotre, who is fighting for ZMPs in Maharashtra, between 2017 and 2019 final notifications for 14 protected areas were issued, but the monitoring committee has not been formed nor has work begun on drafting of the ZMP.

J Innocent Divya, Nilgiris collector, said the court orders would be upheld. "There is no clear plan for land use in the Nilgiris, except for Ooty and Coonoor municipalities". "We need a master plan for the entire hill district, given the fragile ecosystem. However, the ZMP for MTR will help us regulate the land use pattern," she said.