

Maharashtra officially declares 328.9 hectare reserved forest at Aarey Colony in Mumbai

9th October 2020

The Maharashtra government on Thursday issued approval for the preliminary notification and declaration of reserved forest across 328.9 hectares (ha) at Aarey Colony, Goregaon, the state environment and forest ministries both said.

This means 25.5% of the entire green lung (1,287ha) has been declared as reserved forest and would be later handed over to the forest department's control as a part of the Sanjay Gandhi National Park (SNGP). The area declared forest is also three times the size of what was excluded (165ha) from Aarey within the protected buffer zone of SGNP in December 2016.

Forest minister Sanjay Rathod approved the final proposal on Thursday, jointly developed by the state's dairy and forest department, demarcating 288.43 ha (under the dairy department) and 40.46 ha (under the forest department) as reserved forest.

“As directed by the chief minister and environment minister, an overall area declared as reserved forest under section 4 of the Indian Forest Act (IFA), 1927 stands at 328.9 ha, including the 40.46 ha originally proposed for a zoo,” said Rathod adding, “Now, the process will commence to declare this entire area under section 20 of the IFA. Subsequently, the entire area will become part of SGNP.”

The gazette notification will be published over the next two to three days, said Rathod.

According to the preliminary notification, a forest settlement officer, Konkan, would survey the area assessing rights of local residents, nature and scope of the land. This will be followed by suggestions and objections pertaining to land rights, and appeals can be made before the Mumbai suburban collector.

Aaditya Thackeray, state environment minister said, “Our intention is to ensure all tribal (adivasi) people's rights within Aarey are protected. Over the next nine months, the administrative procedure to assess suggestions and objections will be undertaken before the final notification under section 20 of the IFA is published. Meanwhile, we have ensured that the entire area covered under dense tree cover is notified as reserved forest. There are additional areas such as open grasslands that would continue to maintain its status as no-development zones. Additionally, all roads, built-up structures, cowsheds, and proposed infrastructure projects within Aarey have been left out of the area demarcated as forest.”

Since November 2014, Aarey Colony has been a bone of contention ever since proposals for infrastructure projects were proposed by the state. Citizens and environmentalists had been at loggerheads with the Maharashtra government opposing the construction of a Metro car shed, while demanding overall protection of Aarey as a forest, claiming it was one of the last green lungs in Mumbai and home to a large biodiversity of flora and fauna. Recurrent petitions before courts were rejected until chief minister Uddhav Thackeray on September 2 instructed concerned state bodies to declare a large section of Aarey as a forest.

HT had on September 26 reported details from an unsigned draft of the final proposal (which was approved on Thursday) along with a map of the proposed green zone. The reserved forest area encompasses 107 land parcels from Aarey (111.3 ha), Goregaon (71.6 ha), Maroshi (146 ha including area allotted originally for) villages under Andheri and Borivali talukas in Mumbai suburbs. Forest secretary Milind Mhaskar had said a 90-ha area earlier slotted for an encroachment rehabilitation project (ERP) was included in the reserved forest plan as it had rich biodiversity and it was not feasible to shift people there. “The ERP will still be constructed in Aarey but along the periphery away from the present site,” he said.

Once the land is handed over to SGNP, the national park’s total area will increase to 106.5 sq km.

Source: <https://www.hindustantimes.com/mumbai-news/maharashtra-officially-declares-328-9-hectare-reserved-forest-at-aarey-colony-in-mumbai/story-WfzJDKJliRQPQEOKoDQ2DJ.html>