

Odisha forest officer dives into pond to salvage smuggled timber

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Dhamdhare Dhanraj Hanumant, the IFS officer who jumped into the pond to salvage timber logs. (HT Photo)

An Indian Forest Service (IFS) officer of Odisha dived into a village pond to recover priceless sal timbers worth Rs 4 lakh even as scores of villagers resisted his attempt at salvaging the smuggled log.

Dhamdhare Dhanraj Hanumant, a 2016-batch IFS officer and now divisional forest officer of Nayagarh forest division on Monday evening was tipped off about large sal logs being smuggled into Dhushma village, a den of notorious timber smugglers.

He informed the forest ranger and asked him to rush to the spot and verify. When he called back to say that the logs had been taken away, he asked him to follow the drag marks on the road as the villagers drag the logs using buffaloes.

“He said the drag marks were not there. When I personally went to the village, I saw the marks disappearing near a pond. I told my staff to enter the pond and recover the logs as they would be there. But no one was ready to go. They were scared as a few years ago the timber mafia had killed a forester and injured five forest officials. So there was fear among our staff who said the local villagers would gherao them,” said Hanumant.

By 10 pm the local villagers had gathered and insisted that Hanumant and his staff can’t enter the pond at night as it was illegal.

“Most of the people of the village are notorious timber smugglers. They told me it was night time and you can’t enter our pond just like that. You can come in day time. I told them that I don’t care if it is day or night as they have illegally cut the timber from Barbara and Gochha forest bordering the neighbouring Khurda district. When I entered the pond, the logs were submerged. Seeing me enter,

my staff also joined me. We recovered around 200 cubic ft of sal timber worth Rs 4 lakh,” said the officer.

The sal logs were 3 ft in girth and around 100 years old.

Even after seizure of sal logs, the villagers tried to drag the seized timbers but the presence of police force prevented the attempt. However, not a single villager could be booked as the names of the offenders are yet to be known. The DFO said he suspected at least 15 persons of the village could be involved.

Hanumant agreed that the protection of forest may not be happening as it should be.

“There are lacunae from Nayagarh and Khurda side. The timber smugglers are cutting and dragging inside the jungle for 12-14 km. They have mastered the skills of cutting and dragging. Though we have reduced smuggling by employing more squads, we still have lots to do,” said the agriculture graduate from GB Pant University of Agriculture and Technology in Uttarakhand.

Sandeep Tripathy, Odisha’s principal chief conservator of forest, said Hanumant showed leadership quality in salvaging the smuggled timber. “We expect all our forest staff to be as dedicated as him. We have been stressing on foot patrolling by our ground staff to check timber smuggling across forests in the state,” said Tripathy.

Though tree cover of Odisha has increased by 655 sq km as per the 2019 forest survey report compared to 2017, timber smuggling continues to be a major headache of Odisha forest department. Last week, the president of a forest protection committee in Keonjhar was caught while trying to smuggle sal wood.

Source: <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/odisha-forest-officer-dives-into-pond-to-salvage-smuggled-timber/story-hFioryGHkWbWIZpGBJWjbJ.html>