

Tamil Nadu goes wild in protecting flora & fauna

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Representational image | Express

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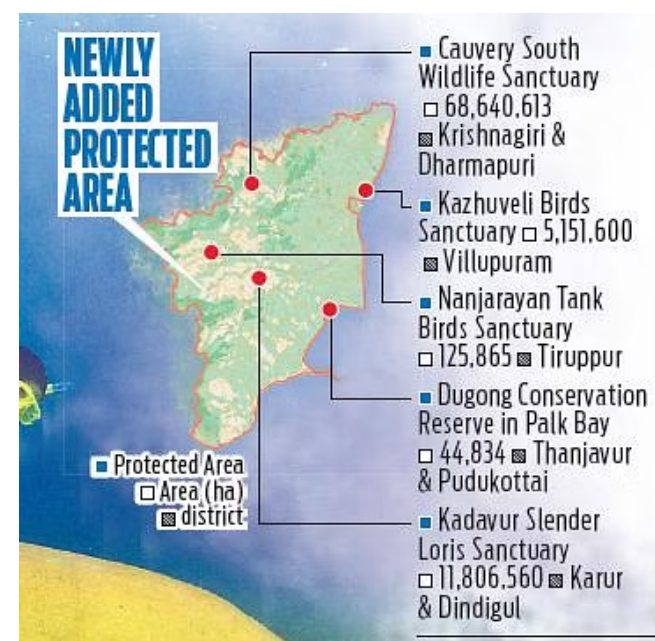
CHENNAI: The year 2022 was a watershed moment for Tamil Nadu in the field of environment and wildlife protection. The State government added 1,355 sq km of land to protected areas and 13 Ramsar sites, which is highest in the country.

Overall, the Tamil Nadu Environment, Forests and Climate Change Department notified two wildlife sanctuaries, two bird sanctuaries, one conservation reserve and one elephant reserve this year. The jewel in the crown was the declaration of 448 sq km in Palk Bay in Thanjavur

and Pudukottai coasts, as Dugong Conservation Reserve. As per data available with Wildlife Institute of India (WII), there are just 240 dugongs (sea cows) in the country and a majority of them is in Palk Bay.

Chief wildlife warden Srinivas R Reddy told TNIE: “Although six areas were notified, Agasthyamalai elephant reserve, which is spread over 1,197 sq km, can’t be counted as new protected area since it is part of a tiger reserve. We are trying to protect all important animal corridors and forest patches. It’s still work in progress.”

For Supriya Sahu, additional chief secretary to government in environment, forests and climate change department, notifying protected areas is only half-job done. “The real work will commence next year, where we will be preparing an Integrated Management Plan for each of the protected areas. This includes conducting surveys, mapping and demarcating boundaries digitally. A complete stock taking of important assets, flora and fauna will be undertaken.”



The senior bureaucrat said modernisation of forest force was also an area of top priority. “As we expand our protected areas, it is paramount to have adequate and well-equipped forest force. The Marine Elite Force is taking shape. In the first batch, 12 local people were recruited and are being training. They will be deployed in Palk Bay and be torch bearers for dugong conservation. The department is procuring fibre glass boats and ammunition required.”

The road ahead, however, is not easy. The forest department will face rough weather in resisting projects proposed by other department that would be

detrimental for environment and wildlife. For instance, the fisheries department is pushing for large-scale commercial farming of seaweed, under the Multi-Purpose Seaweed Park project announced by the union government. The fisheries department has identified 136 coastal villages in Palk Bay and Gulf of Mannar for cultivating Kappaphycus, an exotic seaweed, despite fully knowing the ecological consequences.

At the seaweed India-2022 conference, Commissioner of Fisheries KS Palanisamy said Tamil Nadu plans to increase the production of seaweed from the current 15,000 tonnes to 2 lakh tonnes per annum for which genetically improved Kappaphycus seed will have to be

imported. This would affect dugong conservation as Kappaphycus is known to cause bio-invasion in coral reefs and damage seagrass beds, which is the staple diet of dugongs.

An environmentalist said, on the condition of anonymity, that the success of the dugong project depends on how resolute the forest department will be in keeping Kappaphycus cultivation out of the protected area. Further, the amendment to the Tamil Nadu Minor Mineral Concession Rules, 1959, which will allow mining and quarrying within one km radius of reserve forests, may come as a big blow for wildlife conservation. The forest department was not even consulted before taking such a decision, sources said.

However, chief wildlife warden Srinivas R Reddy said the guidelines are applicable only to protected areas such as national parks and sanctuaries. “When it comes to reserve forests, the parties concerned should come to forest department to obtain No Objection Certificate (NOC). At that time, we will apply the zone of influence concept and critically view the project and raise our objections, if any.”

Forest cover

State forest cover: 26419 sq km Very dense forest: 3593 sq kmOther important
Degraded forest area: 5652.814 sq kmachievements

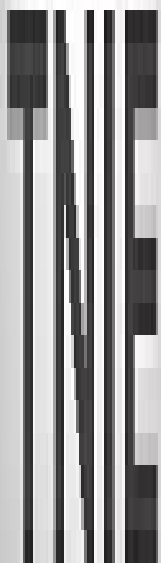
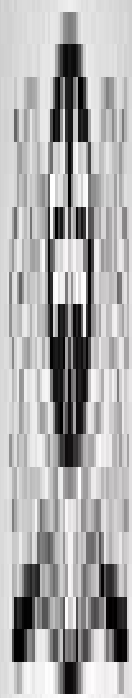
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