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# Zoos in forests against conservation policy: Greens

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Gurgaon: The Centre's decision to allow zoos in forests and buffer zones of wildlife sanctuaries without getting green clearances goes against the country's conservation policy and will only harm areas like the Aravalis in Haryana, environmentalists and experts have warned.

The Union environment ministry, in a letter to all states and Union territories on June 8, said that zoos approved by the Central Zoo Authority (CZA) "can no longer be considered non-forestry activity" if they are located in forest areas. Essentially, the ministry exempted zoos from taking the permissions and green clearances under the Forest Conservation Act if they are being set up in forest areas.

Experts said on Monday that the relaxation in norms weakens conservation efforts, including in states like Haryana, where forest cover accounts for less than 4% of its total area. "It appears to be a ploy to allow non-forest activities in forests. Such manipulation is bound to harm forest conservation for revenue generation or tourism. Today they are allowing plans approved by CZA, tomorrow they may allow zoos run by private persons or municipal corporations in the Aravallis in the name of tourism," said RP Balwan, a former conservator of forests and ex-member of a Supreme Court-appointed committee for delineation of the Aravallis in 2009.

The June 8 order specifies that only zoos operated by the state government can be set up inside forests. Neither private partnership nor the PPP model will be allowed.

Environmentists said establishing zoos in forest areas will mean having to cut down trees to build the structure. Since it is now considered a "forestry activity", it will no longer be necessary to carry out compensatory afforestation, which means forest land and green cover will only be reduced, said Col (retd) SS Oberoi, a Gurgaon-based environmentalist. Zoos will also attract a large number of tourists and vehicles into forest areas, potentially disturbing the wildlife.

The June 8-notification said that setting up zoos in protected areas must “be avoided but in exceptional cases, the fringes of the buffer zone of a protected area” can be considered if it doesn’t hinder the movement of wild animals.

But legal experts questioned why zoos would need to be set up in forest areas at all. Ritwick Dutta of the Legal Initiative for Forest and Environment (LIFE) told TOI, “Diversion of forest land is only if there is no option but to use the forest land. In respect to zoos, there is no requirement for a zoo to be in forest land. This order is not just against the forest policy but also against the Forest Conservation Act.”

According to CZA, there are no immediate plans to construct zoos in India. Haryana currently does not have any zoo in forest land.