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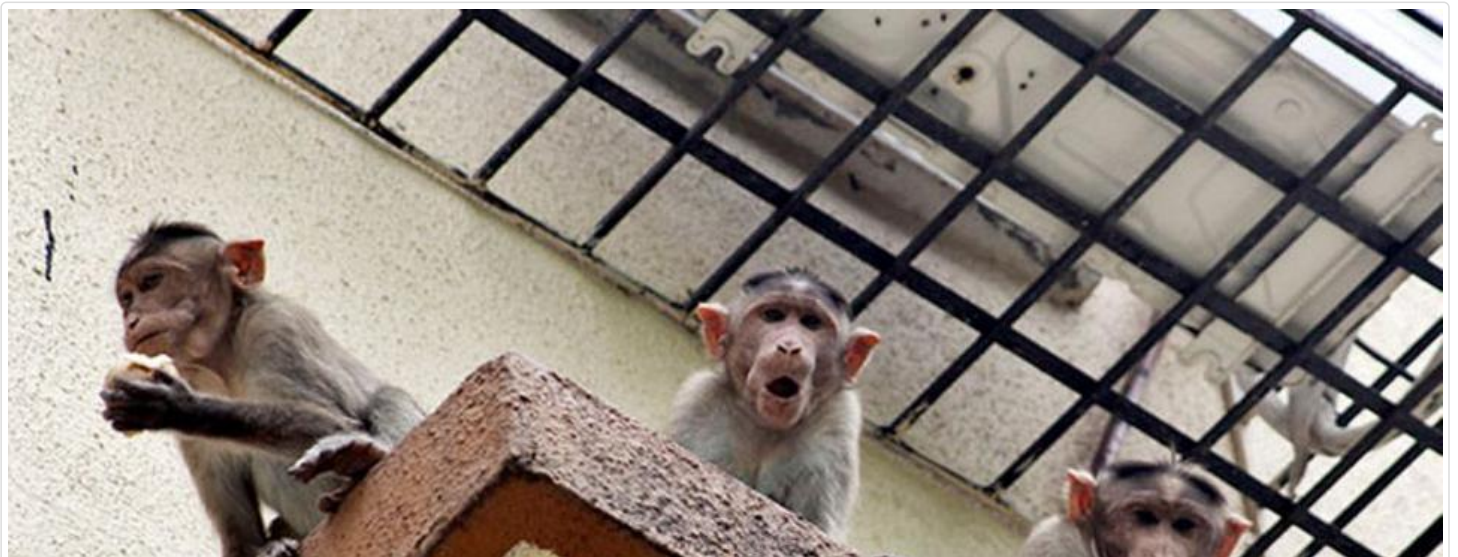
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Mumbai's forest areas finally get protective buffers, but not as envisaged

The Supreme Court had issued a directive to the Union environment ministry to declare ESZs around 21 national park and wildlife sanctuaries

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Sections of the Sanjay Gandhi National Park (SGNP) will also get a ecologically sensitive zone(HT Photo)



The Union environment ministry has approved the creation of a protective buffer around two wildlife sanctuaries in the Mumbai Metropolitan Region (MMR).

The Maharashtra government had proposed the creation of an ecologically sensitive zone (ESZ) around Tungareshwar Wildlife Sanctuary (TWLS) and Tansa Wildlife Sanctuary more than six years ago. It had created a draft notification in August 2016, but the environment ministry delayed the final notification. If the notification had been issued earlier, it could have stopped construction activity in areas bordering the sanctuaries. Environmental groups have reported that construction companies and mining groups had taken advantage of the delay and moved into areas earmarked for the buffer.

The matter received attention only after environmentalists petitioned the Bombay high court (HC). In December 2018, the Supreme Court (SC) had issued a directive to the Union environment ministry to declare ESZs around 21 national park and wildlife sanctuaries which do not have buffer zones. Of the 651 protection areas (PA) in the country, 316 now have protective buffers.

The notification has created a 67.26 sq km-buffer around the 85.70 sq km-Tungareshwar forest. Tansa, which is spread over 304.81 sq km, has got a 490.29 sq km buffer. The buffer zone includes villages, but the notification puts restrictions on construction and industries while allowing the original residents to continue agricultural activities. Tungareshwar is an important wildlife area as it is connected to other protected natural areas like the Nagla block of the Sanjay Gandhi National Park (SGNP) and Tansa. The sanctuary's diverse habitats, including littoral, forests and hills, is home to leopards, wild boar, Indian muntjac (barking deer), langur, bonnet and rhesus macaques.

Creating buffers like ESZ protects forest areas from human activity in the boundary that could affect wildlife. ESZ areas have restrictions on mining, industrial activities, and unregulated development. Only agriculture, small-scale industries and minor infrastructure are permitted. The Maharashtra government has said that after the notification, they will be able to enforce restrictions on construction and mining in the area. But environmental groups that had petitioned the courts are not happy with the results and have said that the area of the ESZ, especially the one around Tungareshwar, has been truncated because of pressure from politicians and people with interest in mining in the area. The original area for the ESZ for TWLS proposed by the state government in 2012 was 280 sq km; what has been notified is less than a fourth of the proposed area.

This is not the first time the environment ministry has diluted ESZ provisions for protected forest areas in MMR. In the case of SGNP, a section of which is located in Mumbai suburban district, the ministry had proposed a buffer ranging between 100 metres to four kilometres from the park's boundaries. This would have created a natural barrier with an area of 59.4 sq

km – almost 60% as big as the 104 sq km park. The draft of the notification – which was released to the public in January 2016 – proposed banning of all construction within a radius of the park's boundaries, in addition to the creation of a buffer where all development activities were to be restricted. However, the final notification had watered down the provisions. The ban on construction in the 1-km radius, proposed in the earlier draft, has been removed in the final notification, with the document practically opening up the ESZ for extensive construction.

In the case of Karnala Bird Sanctuary, another protected area in MMR, the ESZ covers an area of 30 sq km around the sanctuary's core area of 12.1 sq km, but environmentalists have said that the original draft was modified to decrease the radius of the ESZ from 10 km to 8km, to accommodate the widening of the Mumbai-Goa highway and construction of the new airport at Navi Mumbai.

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