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Ecotourism guidelines allow for temporary structures in forests

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Environmentalists call for monitoring, informed restrictions



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Conservationists and environmentalists are disconcerted by the Standing Committee of the National Board for Wildlife’s nod to the guidelines on Ecotourism in Forest and Wildlife Areas 2021, which, among other things, allow for “temporary structures” to come up in forest areas.

The committee, in its meeting this month, decided to recommend the guidelines which also have an indicative list of protected areas where ecotourism could be developed. Among these in Karnataka are the Bannerghatta National Park, Kudremukh National Park, Cauvery Wildlife Sanctuary, Daroji Bear and Pushpagiri Wildlife Sanctuaries.

The guidelines, mentioned in the tentative agenda of the 63rd meeting of the committee, makes a case for ecotourism saying that nature conservation entails interactions with people as a central concept. “Ecotourism has the potential to create significant opportunities for building public awareness and mass movement towards conservation of nature and natural resources while expanding overall returns to the economy, improving skill base, creating new knowledge and green jobs, and improving the livelihoods of the local communities,” it said.

Ecotourism will be promoted on the basis of “science based planning,” it says, adding that the plan will “appropriately demarcate the ecotourism zone upon assessment of management requirements of the target wildlife, the habitat or the geographical entity, and their behavioural and ecological characteristics.”

Allowing structures

What is ruffling feathers is the site development aspect. While the guidelines promise to develop such zones in an “eco-friendly manner” by ensuring that the natural profile and ecological integrity of the site is maintained, they also mention that any ecotourism facility or structure on forest lands will be subject to the provisions of the Forest (Conservation) Act 1980. “No permanent structure shall be made/constructed to create ecotourism facility/structure, but temporary structures/facility made of predominantly natural material of local origin shall be allowed in protected area or on forest land,” the guidelines stated.

Wildlife conservationist Giridhar Kulkarni said it was the second point that was not palatable. "Allowing temporary tourism structures on forest land without approval under Forest (Conservation) Act, 1980 is definitely not in the interest of Forest and Wildlife as the move may open floodgates for tourism. I request the Central government to bring even temporary tourism structures on forest land under the ambit of the Forest (Conservation) Act, 1980," he said.

G. Veeresh, honorary wildlife warden, Chikkamagaluru, pointed out that the State's Jungle Lodges and Resorts, for instance, was already operating in many places. "There are existing camps and properties in Kemmanagundi and Kudremukh, for example. I hope they are looking at utilising existing structures rather than adding more. The policy also needs to be clear on tourist numbers and prevent overcrowding. Otherwise, it will definitely pressurise the forest," he said. Calling for informed restrictions, he said of existing homestays, more than double the legal numbers are illegal and the tourism department has no powers. The ecotourism guidelines bat for "homestays managed by local communities on non-forest land." "What we need is a separate tourism policy for the Western Ghats, which is already under the onslaught of several issues," he added.

Temporary structures

Mrunmayee Amarnath, a conservationist who is presently pursuing M.Phil. in Conservation Leadership at the University of Cambridge, said when they say temporary structures, they refer to construction materials and not time.

"If a full-fledged temporary structure operates throughout the year, how different would it be from a permanent structure? Temporary structures make a difference only when it is operational for a specific period of time. Moreover, national parks also have eco-sensitive zones. So why must any kind of tourism infrastructure be built inside the protected area?" she asked.

On one hand, the government is implementing voluntary relocation of people to create inviolate space inside protected areas and on the other, it is promoting construction of tourism infrastructure in the same areas, she said. "Isn't that shifting out one set of people and bringing in a new set? For example, this is exactly what is happening in Bhagavathi camp of Kudremukh NP. Inviolate space means it must be free of all anthropogenic activities including tourism," she added.

Major concerns

T.V. Ramachandra from the Energy & Wetlands Research Group, Centre for Ecological Sciences, Indian Institute of Science, pointed out that even if the guidelines are ecologically

harmonious, the implementation and "lack of integrity and ecological knowledge among the present breed of decision makers" are major concerns.

"Ecologically sensitive core regions need to be protected without any disturbance that would affect the ecological integrity and biodiversity of the region. We need to learn from the past mistakes, wherein allowing mushrooming of resorts in the ecologically fragile regions in Kodagu, Shivamogga, and Chikmagalur have led to large-scale devastations evident from recurring episodes of landslides, and mudslides with the loss of life and property," he said.

He also alleged that during earlier discussions with the district administrations, it was evident that most decision makers are "environmental illiterate" and often succumb to the "pressure of powerful lobby and owners of resorts" - buildings that have come up under the tag of ecotourism but are "neither local nor had any interest or concern towards the conservation of ecological fragile regions."

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