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Water ATMs for tourists to check plastic waste in Western Ghats

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KOLHAPUR: The forest department has decided to install water ATMs at top tourist destinations in the ecologically-sensitive Western Ghats to reduce the use of plastic water bottles. Locals from the five top tourist destinations near Mahabaleshwar collected a whopping seven lakh plastic water bottles this year; fuelling the urgent measures to curb pollution.

The first water ATM will be installed at Maharashtra's top tourist destinations near Mahabaleshwar on a pilot basis. The five locations in the vicinity attract more than 1.5 million tourists annually. Non-biodegradable materials, mostly plastic bottles and food wrappers, thrown by tourists have become a major headache for the forest department and the locals.

Foresters said that the ATMs would be installed in Kshetra Mahabaleshwar, Bhekawali, Avakali, Pratapgad and Gureghar in Satara district on a pilot basis from January 2016 and would not be charging the users. After assessing the response, additional water ATMs would be installed in eco-tourism locations in Kolhapur and Sangli districts including Kaas Plateau, Thoseghar, Tilari, Chandoli and Barki.

"We have started taking stock of the eco-tourism projects in Satara, Sangli, Kolhapur, Sindhudurg and Ratnagiri districts. Our purpose is to find out solutions to the problems created by non-biodegradable material. The pilot project of water ATM is a solution. We are also planning to collect and compress the wrappers and send it to factories where it can be used in furnaces," said M K Rao, chief conservator of forests (Kolhapur circle) told TOI.

The forest officer explained that the water ATM would use cost-effective reverse osmosis method to purify the water sourced from wells. The tourists would be able to fill their water bottles with the ATM instead of purchasing new ones. They can also use paper cups placed at the ATM, which will be maintained by the joint forest management committees, he said.

The five locations were selected considering the heavy tourist footfall and the efficiency of the village-level joint forest management committees. These five places earned Rs 1.62 crore so far this year through tourism and the funds are being used for constructing facilities for tourists and welfare of locals.

Over the years, the committees have become financially strong. In 2014, Bhekawali villagers committee provided assistance of Rs 50,000 to seven landslide-affected families. This year, three committees have donated Rs 2.5 lakh to the chief ministers fund for drought relief work.

Environmental activists said that the initiatives such as water ATMs should be promoted to tackle the problems of non-biodegradable solid waste generated by tourists. "If we fail to address this issue, the condition of forests will deteriorate gradually. The initiative to install water ATMs should be replicated across all the eco-tourism destinations in the region," Rohan Bhate, environmental activist from Satara, said.

He pointed out that village-level eco-tourism development committees had successfully managed forests and tourism has grown in areas where the committees are providing facilities to tourists.