

# 'Necessary action being taken to restore elephant corridors'

## Evicting encroachers an issue, says Principal Chief Conservator of Forests

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The Forest Department has apprised the Madras High Court of the laborious process and difficulties in identifying, notifying and restoring elephant corridors in the Nilgiris district. The Principal Chief Conservator of Forests (PCCF) and Chief Wildlife Warden also informed the court about corridors that had been identified but were yet to be notified, and how any move to evict encroachers leads to displacement of many people and triggers serious law and order issues.

Chief Justice Sanjib Banerjee and Justice P.D. Audikesavalu were told that three forest divisions (Mudumalai Tiger Reserve, the Nilgiris and Gudalur) in Nilgiris district had elephant corridors. Of them, MTR division had one notified corridor – Sigur Plateau; and two identified but yet to be notified corridors – MTR-Mukurthi Na-



The court was told that three forest divisions had elephant corridors.

tional Park-Silent Valley National Park and MTR-Moyar Valley-Sathyamangalam Tiger Reserve.

A G.O. was issued on August 31, 2010 notifying the Sigur Plateau corridor spread over 3,413.73 hectares and it was upheld by the High Court. However, since a big chunk of the notified corridor consisted of private lands on which resorts and guest houses had been built, the matter was taken on appeal to the Supreme Court which appointed an inquiry committee. The three-member committee, led by retired High Court judge K. Venkataraman, received 226 claims/objections to the notification. While those objections were being scrutinised, the tenure of the committee end-

ed on July 31. The committee has now requested the government to extend its tenure up to April 2022 to complete the inquiry and based on its recommendations, appropriate action would be taken, the PCCF said.

The status report was filed in response to a PIL petition filed by activist S. Muralidharan. As far as the two identified but yet-to-be notified corridors were concerned, the PCCF (and chief wildlife warden) Shekhar Kumar Niraj said the MTR-Mukurthi National Park-Silent Valley National Park corridor was approximately 3 km wide and 17 km long. The migrating pachyderms encounter multiple tea estates, villages and towns while travelling on this corridor. Similarly, the 35-km-long MTR-Moyar Valley-Sathyamangalam Tiger Reserve corridor too passes through villages. High tension electricity lines traverse through this corridor between Moyar village and Bhavanisagar dam posing grave threat to animals. Though the residents had been demanding a bridge across Moyar river in the border of Mudumalai and Sathyamangalam Tiger Reserves, its effect on the ecosystem and elephant migration had to be

analysed, the officer said.

Providing a list of interventions required with regard to the two identified corridors, the PCCF said a committee on the lines of one that had been formed for finalisation of Sigur plateau corridor could be formed for notifying these two corridors too.

As far as the Nilgiris forest division was concerned, Mr. Niraj said the Wildlife Trust of India, in its research study titled 'Right of Passage: Elephant Corridors of India', had not officially recorded any corridor in this division because the corridors here were fragmented and discontinuous in status due to plantations.

Stating that heavy vehicular traffic on two main ghat roads (Coonoor and Kotagiri ghat roads), the steep cuttings that had been made for laying the roads and the occupation of the land on either side of the road were the main obstacles for the movement of the elephants, the PCCF said better access could be provided in the shape of a corridor for the elephants to use the Coonoor and Kallar rivers in this forest division.

"Hence, a detailed research study is need in the

upper Nilgiris to identify the elephant migratory routes and seasonal migratory paths," his status report read.

On Gudalur forest division, he said, it had as many as 11 local elephant corridors. However, since Gudalur taluk lies in the foothills of the Nilgiris and was sandwiched between MTR and New Amarambalam Sanctuary in Kerala, the demand for land had led to fragmentation of Gudalur forests spread over 2,544.626 hectares. "Since forests in Gudalur are fragmented and the habitat degraded, elephants roam in search of food and water outside forest areas. The major factor for quality degradation is encroachment in forest lands," the PCCF said. Stating that fresh attempts to encroach forest lands were being prevented through constant monitoring by special teams of the Forest Department, Mr. Niraj told the court that necessary action had been initiated by the respective District Forest Officers for restoring the elephant corridors in Coimbatore and the Nilgiris districts in co-ordination with the respective district administration and voluntary organisations.