

Tourism rules in tiger reserves violate Wildlife & Forest Act: National Tiger Conservation Authority members

NEW DELHI: The guidelines for [tourism](#) in [tiger reserves](#) submitted to the Supreme Court may be in violation of the [Forest Rights Act](#) and the [Wildlife Protection Act](#). Ahead of Wednesday's hearing in the Supreme Court, two members of the panel have written to environment minister [Jayanthi Natarajan](#) expressing their concerns about the draft.

The guidelines were drawn up by committee of the National Tiger Conservation Authority, which set up after the Supreme Court ordered it on August 29. Two members of the Committee, Swathi Seshadri of EQUATIONS (Equitable Tourism Options) and Tushar Dash from NGO Vasundhra, have written to Natarajan detailing their concerns. They have written to the minister after it became evident that the [National Tiger Conservation Authority](#) chief Rajesh Gopal, who is also the convenor of the committee to draw up the guidelines, had completely ignored their objections.

Their contention is that the current set of guidelines make assumptions that are both in violation of existing laws— Wildlife Protection Act, Forest Rights Act and the Panchayat Extension to Scheduled Areas Act—as well as beyond the scope of the committee. They also say that the guidelines have been drawn up in manner that allows the tourism industry control over the manner in which funds are utilized, even though such a move is in violation of the Wildlife Protection Act.

The members said that though they had written to the Tiger Conservation Authority director Rajesh Gopal listing out their objections and concerns, their note of dissent was not included in the documents submitted to the court on September 26. "The dissent note was not included in the final guidelines despite writing to Gopal in advance," the letter states. Neither did the NTCA boss respond to the objections. "We therefore feel it urgent to send the note of objections to you to inform you about the key issues and objections raised about the current version of the guidelines, which have been submitted to the Supreme Court by the NTCA" the members said.

They have urged Natarajan to step in so that the objections become part of the record and can be taken into consideration by the Court. "Since the guidelines are going to have an impact on the rights of scheduled tribes and other forest dwellers the implementation of the Forest Rights Act, we would like to have your intervention and ask NTCA to include our dissent note in the next hearing on October 3," the members appealed to Natarajan.

The guidelines as submitted to the apex court assume that the identification of core and buffer areas in tiger reserves is complete, this even as the NTCA has stated that it neither has any overall guidelines to undertake the demarcation nor can it certify that this was done in accordance with the Wildlife Protection Act, Forest Rights Act and the Panchayat Extension to Scheduled Areas Act.