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## Villagers against CWH status for Cotigao

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CANACONA: Residents of Cotigao and surrounding villages are apprehensive of the state government proposal to bestow 'Critical Wildlife Habitat' (CWH) status to [Cotigao wildlife sanctuary](#) and are planning to oppose the move at the public hearing organized by the forest department on Thursday.

Villagers discussed the issue at a meeting on Sunday held at Yeda-Cotigao and former local MLA Isidore Fernandes called for unity among the villagers to oppose the proposal.

Speaking to TOI, Poinguinim MLA Ramesh Tawadkar said that facilities such as electricity connections and road construction are in progress in the area under the tribal sub plan, and the government can't force the people to vacate the area by declaring it a critical zone.

Officials of the forest department's wildlife division, however, said the CWH proposal is as per a tribal sub plan aimed at implementing the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers Act (Recognition of Forests Rights), Act 2006. The CWH is carved out before initiating the process to recognize rights of dwellers under the tribal sub plan. Deputy conservator of forests (wildlife and eco-tourism) Debendra Dalai said the objective of the Act is to recognize and vest forest rights and occupation in forest land to scheduled tribes and other traditional forest dwellers residing in such forests for generations but whose rights could not be recorded.

No development, whatsoever, will be allowed in the area once it is given CWH status but genuine rights of STs and traditional forest dwellers within the area would be addressed, an official said. Sources said some houses might have to be shifted outside the CWH limits. Sources said that 85.65 sq km of Cotigao wildlife sanctuary's 300 sq km are proposed to be given CWH status.

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