

Forest dwellers term proposed tiger reserve as illegal

COIMBATORE: Stating in unequivocal terms that no forest conservation activity would be possible without community participation, over 19 organisations representing traditional forest dwellers and other aborigines living within the Nilgiris Biosphere Reserve (NBR) met in Gudalur near Ooty on Saturday and adopted a declaration terming the proposed tiger reserves in Wayanad and Sathyamangalam as illegal.

According to them, they are being planned in blatant violation of the provisions of the Forest Rights Act, 2006. The declaration also wanted immediate reversal of the tiger reserve status granted to Mudumalai National Park last year saying it has caused massive displacement and denial of livelihood. It has also termed pathetic the condition of the tribal people and other forest dwellers living on the fringes of Nagerhole and bandipur tiger reserves as the forest department was denying them constitutionally granted rights.

"During the meeting, members thoroughly deliberated and discussed the state of the Protected Areas of the Nilgiris Biosphere Reserve. "We have found repeated instances of violation of the Forest Rights Act of 2006 and the Wildlife Protection Act - Amendment of 2006. We urge political parties and environmentalists to raise their voice against continued dispossession of the local communities from their traditional habitat and community resources," said C R Bijoy of Campaign For Survival and Dignity. Expressing extreme anxiety over the ban on cattle grazing within the forests apart from denying the right to collect minor forest produces, the declaration has found each and every tiger reserve in the region (be it implemented or under proposal) as arbitrary, unilateral, discriminating and drafted without consulting the affected communities.

"Local communities are being treated as enemies of the forests and they are being alienated from their livelihood. There are dubious agendas behind each tiger reserve proposal. The tiger population thrived in many parts before the reserves came up and local communities were exercising their forest rights," pointed out V T Selvaraj, a rights' activist from Gudalur.

We also strongly feel that it is necessary to collectively question the rationale behind carving out Protected Areas and the politics of the so-called conservation groups behind this," the declaration said. It will soon be submitted to the central and state governments.

Studies conducted by voluntary organisations AIFFM and EQUATIONS in Nagerhole, Bandipur and Mudmalai tiger reserves and the proposed tiger reserve in Wayanad have confirmed that the tiger reserves are causing imbalance to the lives of tribals and other aborigines, the declaration said. Forest rights committees from tribal villages Kerehaadi, Maladahaadi, Nagarholehaadi, Bommadu, Avregunda, Basavanahalli, Muguvinahalli haadi, Muguvinahalli, Ananjigundi, Guddekeri, Hadinakanive, Haggadahalla, Kaniyanapura Colony and BalleBudakatta Krishikara Sangha took part in the deliberations. The meeting was held with the support of National Adivasi Alliance, National Adivasi Andolan, All India Forum of Forest Movements and Campaign for Survival and Dignity.