

Wildlife board panel to revisit guidelines on declaring ESZs around national parks, sanctuaries; make them more site-specific

In hill states like Himachal Pradesh, around 65% of the area is already under forest or protected status and rigid imposition of ESZ norms could hinder development, said Union minister Bhupender Yadav.

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New Delhi | Updated: July 12, 2025 17:16 IST



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ESZs are demarcated and notified to create a buffer around protected areas such as parks and sanctuaries to regulate activities. (Source: File)

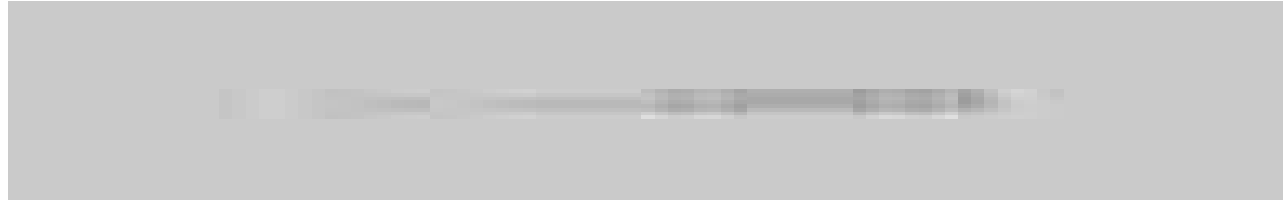
The standing committee of the National Board for Wildlife (SC-NBWL), has decided to revisit the government's 2011 guidelines on declaration of eco-sensitive zones (ESZ) around national parks and wildlife sanctuaries to make them more site-specific and tuned to ecological and socio-economic realities of each region, as per the minutes of its June 26 meeting. The meeting was chaired by Union Environment Minister Bhupender Yadav.

In another important policy matter, the committee directed chief wildlife wardens of state governments to submit compliance reports on implementation of terms and conditions imposed while clearing mining, highways, railway sector projects by next meeting. It was discussed that if compliance reports were not submitted, the SC-NBWL should not consider proposals from those states.

The SC-NBWL decided that the Union Environment Ministry will prepare a note on the ESZ issue and carry out international consultations with the impact assessment, eco-sensitive zone, forest conservation, wetland and other relevant divisions. "Thereafter, a consultation meeting by the ESZ and WL (wildlife) division may be convened. The outcome of the exercise therefore may be submitted to the committee for further deliberation," the minutes of the SC-NBWL noted.

ESZs are demarcated and notified to create a buffer around protected areas such as parks and sanctuaries to regulate activities. The 2011 guidelines have laid down an indicative framework on demarcation of ESZs ranging from identification of land use around parks, grouping of activities as permitted, regulated, prohibited and promoted.

States also ought to prepare a zonal master plan within two years of an ESZ notification.



‘Blanket 10-km ESZ won’t serve purpose’

Minister Yadav suggested that a note must be prepared on the revision of guidelines and circulated to various ministries and states to invite suggestions, as per the minutes. Yadav said that extending a blanket 10-km ESZ to all protected areas, irrespective of local ecological and geographical conditions, will not serve the intended purpose.

He went on to cite the examples of the Sanjay Gandhi National Park (SGNP) in [Mumbai](#) and the Asola Bhatti wildlife sanctuary in [Delhi](#), both located in urban areas, to underline his point. In hill states like Himachal Pradesh, Yadav said that approximately 65 per cent of the area is already under forest or protected status and “further rigid imposition of ESZ norms could hinder local development without proportional ecological gains,” he said.

“Therefore, ESZ rules should not be uniform across the country; instead, they must be adapted to reflect the specific ecological and socio-economic realities of each region,” he added.

Chief wildlife wardens of Himachal Pradesh, Kerala, Karnataka, and [Tamil Nadu](#) expressed different concerns on the issue. Amitabh Gautam, Chief Wildlife Warden, Himachal Pradesh, said that regulation and prohibition of activities, such as mining and other commercial activities, was affecting local residents.

Kerala Chief Wildlife Warden Pramod G Krishnan said that a proposal to declare areas around the Silent Valley National Park as sanctuary was not recommended by the state wildlife board citing apprehensions that this would mean restrictions in the ESZ around the new sanctuary.

Meanwhile, Wildlife Institute of India (WII) director Virendra Tiwari (now former director), pointed out that existing guidelines tuned towards land-based sanctuaries may not suit marine sanctuaries and their eco-systems. "...There may be specific regulatory principles tailored to the unique ecological characteristics and conservation needs of marine ecosystems," he stated.

For protected areas where the process of ESZ demarcation has not been undertaken, areas within a 10-km range of the protected area boundary is considered as the default ESZ, based on the Supreme Court's directions. The ministry has published 347 final ESZ notifications, as per data submitted by the government in [Rajya Sabha](#) last year.

Experts voice concerns

H S Singh, non-governmental member of the SC-NBWL who raised the agenda in the meeting, said that certain activities that were once categorised as 'promoted', but if their scale was big, they could pose a threat to flora and fauna. In his agenda brief, Singh said that giant solar or wind energy plants using large sprawl of lands around parks may threaten wildlife and their migration routes. He advocated that such projects should be regulated in ESZs.

The 2011 guidelines already mention that ESZs can be flexible and protected-area specific. Speaking about the SC-NBWL's decision, retired Indian Forest Service (IFS) officer Prakriti Srivastava, who led the environment ministry's efforts to prepare the 2011 guidelines, said: "The guidelines are already flexible and allow states to incorporate any issues relevant to them, so how much more can they decide to dilute them?"

Regarding monitoring of compliance, Singh had raised concerns that the SC-NBWL is not aware of the implementation of terms and conditions for major projects, despite reminders. He suggested that the committee should not be liberal with states who had not submitted compliance reports.

The SC-NBWL advises the government on wildlife conservation, policy and appraises projects that fall in areas inside and around protected areas such as national parks and wildlife sanctuaries.



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