

# NTCA limits tiger corridors to minimal requirement, multiple projects to benefit

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Tiger corridors are vital wildlife pathways that connect tiger habitats, enabling animal movement, gene flow, and long term survival.

In a volte-face less than a month after it affirmed before the Bombay High Court that the identification of tiger corridors must take cognizance of multiple scientific studies and parameters, the National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA) issued a clarification yesterday,

limiting the number of such corridors, primarily, to only 32 “least cost pathways” identified in 2014.

Tiger corridors are vital wildlife pathways that connect tiger habitats, enabling animal movement, gene flow, and long term survival. Under the Wildlife Protection Act, 1972, development projects requiring land in or around tiger reserves or corridors require statutory clearance from the standing committee of the National Board for Wildlife (SC-NBWL).

Among the potential beneficiaries of the new limited definition of tiger corridors are Western Coalfields Limited (Durgapur open cast mines) and Lloyds Metals & Energy (Surajgarh iron ore mines) in Maharashtra.

Asked about the turnabout, NTCA’s inspector general (forests) Sanjayan Kumar, who issued the clarification in a letter to all state governments yesterday, declined to comment.

While discussing the Western Coalfields mining project within a tiger corridor connecting the Tadoba-Kanhargaoan-Tipeshwar forests in Maharashtra’s Chandrapur district at the March 12 meeting of the SC-NBWL, a senior ministry official observed that projects that did not fall within the least cost pathways designated for tigers were being sent from Maharashtra even though such projects should not require SC-NBWL approval.

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Considering the same project at the 84th meeting of the SC-NBWL on June 26, the Director General (Forests) noted that “Maharashtra alone is facing this issue” and the Environment Secretary said that the NTCA should “clarify that the only the least cost pathways identified by them should be treated as tiger corridors.”

But the NTCA was already issued notice by the Bombay High Court on June 25 in a case challenging the decision taken by the Maharashtra State Board for Wildlife (SBWL) on April 17 to send for SC-NBWL approval only those projects that fell within the least cost tiger pathways.

Among the projects up for discussion at that SBWL meeting were two proposals requiring 9.5 sq km of forest land — mining of hematite from quartzite, systemic recovery of iron ore, and

laying out of roadside conveyors — in Surajgarh mines run by Lloyds Metals & Energy in Gadchiroli's Etapalli.

On July 25, in its affidavit before the Bombay HC, the NTCA cited a letter issued “with the power conferred to it” under the Wildlife Act to Maharashtra in 2023 to reiterate multiple benchmarks for defining tiger corridors:

- \* Protected Areas occupied by tigers,

- \* Least cost pathways identified in 2014,

- \* Corridors marked in Tiger Conservation Plans (TCPs) of each reserve,

- \* Corridors identified by Wildlife Institute of India (WII) — “Tiger corridors of eastern Vidarbha landscape” — in 2016,

- \* Corridors identified by WII — “Telemetry based tiger corridors of Vidarbha” landscape” — in 2021, and

- \* Distribution of tigers based on quadrennial all-India Tiger Estimations (AITEs)

At today's hearing, the NTCA modified that stand by placing on record the clarification it issued yesterday. This reduced the benchmarks for tiger corridors only to the “least cost pathways” identified in its 2014 report and the ones recorded by tiger reserves in their individual TCPs.

The exclusion of multiple WII studies and the robust AITE data has surprised many as the 2014 NTCA report itself cautioned that “the corridors shown in this report are minimal requirement” and that “alternative connectivities do exist in many areas” which “need to be conserved.”

In fact, the last month's affidavit said that the NTCA was “in the process of the refinement of tiger corridors” based on the AITE data. “It is unlikely that a refined corridor report will be released before the Maharashtra issues are settled unless the HC specifically asks for it,” said an Environment ministry official.

The case will come up again after two weeks.

This July, researchers from Nagpur-based LRC Foundation applied contemporary Circuitscape modelling, which reflects multiple probable paths of animal movement—not just the “shortest

route” – to come up with 192 corridors form a dense network across 10 central Indian states, enabling tiger movement across 30 tiger reserves and around 150 protected areas.



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