

# Wildlife board backs 'coexistence' in tiger reserves

The SC NBWL advocates for coexistence of forest dwellers and wildlife in tiger reserves while promoting voluntary relocations for willing communities.

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The standing committee of the National Board for Wildlife (SC NBWL) has recommended that coexistence between forest dwellers and wildlife be actively promoted in core areas of tiger reserves, while also facilitating voluntary relocation of communities willing to move, according to minutes of the committee's meeting held on February 28, released last week.

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The committee's position marks a shift from the relocation-first posture of the National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA), which HT reported on September 7, 2024 had written to 19 tiger habitat states calling for expedited relocation of forest villages from core areas. The NTCA letter had said "around 591 villages comprising 64,801 families are still residing in the core area. The progress of village relocation is very slow and it poses a grave concern in tiger conservation."

The question of who has the right to live in tiger reserve core areas sits at the intersection of wildlife conservation and the rights of forest-dwelling communities — many of them Scheduled Tribes — who have inhabited these landscapes for generations. It is among the most contested issues in Indian conservation policy, with case pending before the Supreme Court.

The SC NBWL meeting was informed of a different set of figures: 298 villages comprising about 32,198 families have been relocated from core areas of tiger reserves so far, while around 730 villages with approximately 76,032 families still remain inside core areas — designated Critical Tiger Habitats — across the country.

“The presentation also indicated that a substantial number of such villages are located in landscapes of Central India and the Eastern Ghats, and that significant financial resources would be required for facilitating relocation of willing villages,” the minutes said.

The committee has sought socio-economic and ecological studies by the Wildlife Institute of India, with NTCA support, to help states more accurately identify core areas, buffer areas and eco-sensitive zones of tiger reserves, and to enable communities to make informed choices between voluntary residence and voluntary relocation.

Ecologist Raman Sukumar, a member of the SC NBWL, pointed out during the meeting that in November 2007 the NTCA had directed all states to notify the core or Critical Tiger Habitat of tiger reserves within one month. Several states, pressed by that deadline, had hastily expanded core areas by merging portions of buffer zones without adequate site-specific assessment, with the result that a large number of villages previously in buffer zones came to fall within Critical Tiger Habitat.

Sukumar cited the Biligiri Ranganathaswamy Temple Tiger Reserve in Karnataka, where tribal communities have lived for centuries, and the Sathyamangalam Tiger Reserve in Tamil Nadu, which contains agricultural enclaves whose inhabitants could not easily be relocated for social and cultural reasons — noting that tiger populations in both reserves had nevertheless increased substantially. This, he said, suggested that coexistence-based management had in some instances supported conservation outcomes without requiring relocation. The Chief Wildlife Warden of Karnataka concurred with these observations.

“The Committee deliberated on the importance of promoting coexistence between wildlife and local communities, while also facilitating voluntary relocation from core areas wherever communities are willing. The Committee observed that a balanced approach is required which recognizes both conservation priorities and the socio-economic aspirations of local communities,” the SC NBWL said.

Tushar Dash, an independent forest rights expert, said the policy framework for coexistence already exists under the Forest Rights Act, 2006, and the Wildlife (Protection) Amendment Act of 2006.

“Coexistence rights of communities are already there. We understand

that the ministry of tribal affairs has written to ministry of environment and forests about a detailed framework for coexistence which is based on recognition of forest rights and governance of community forest resources by gram sabhas. This should be enforced in the protected areas/tiger reserves," Dash said. "The NTCA direction for relocation of villages from tiger reserves should be withdrawn as it contravenes with the coexistence framework and creates conflicts."

The financial assistance for voluntary relocation under the central scheme has been raised from ₹10 lakh to ₹15 lakh per family, according to a Lok Sabha response by Kirti Vardhan Singh, minister of state for environment, following a revision by the environment ministry in March 2023.

Relocation of forest dwellers from tiger reserves has been a deeply contested issue. It is also the subject of a live case before the Supreme Court — Wildlife First & Ors Versus Ministry of Forest and Environment and Ors.

HT reported on July 6, 2025 that the ministry of tribal affairs had asked the environment ministry for scientific evidence to substantiate claims that granting forest rights to tribal communities causes forest degradation, escalating a dispute over the Forest Rights Act, 2006 — which recognises the rights of forest-dwelling Scheduled Tribes and other traditional forest dwellers over forest land and resources, and confers on gram sabhas the legal power to protect ecologically important areas.

The SC NBWL meeting also took up the growing incidence of human-leopard conflict outside protected areas, where leopards have adapted to agricultural land, scrub forests and peri-urban landscapes. The committee discussed the need to strengthen infrastructure for rescued or conflict leopards, including the possible expansion of existing zoos and the development of dedicated rescue centres by states and union territories, with technical and financial support from the ministry. It also deliberated on scientific studies into the use of immunocontraceptives — which suppress fertility — for population management of leopards in areas where human-leopard interactions are frequent.