

# Apex wildlife body readies guidelines on 'religious structures' in sanctuaries

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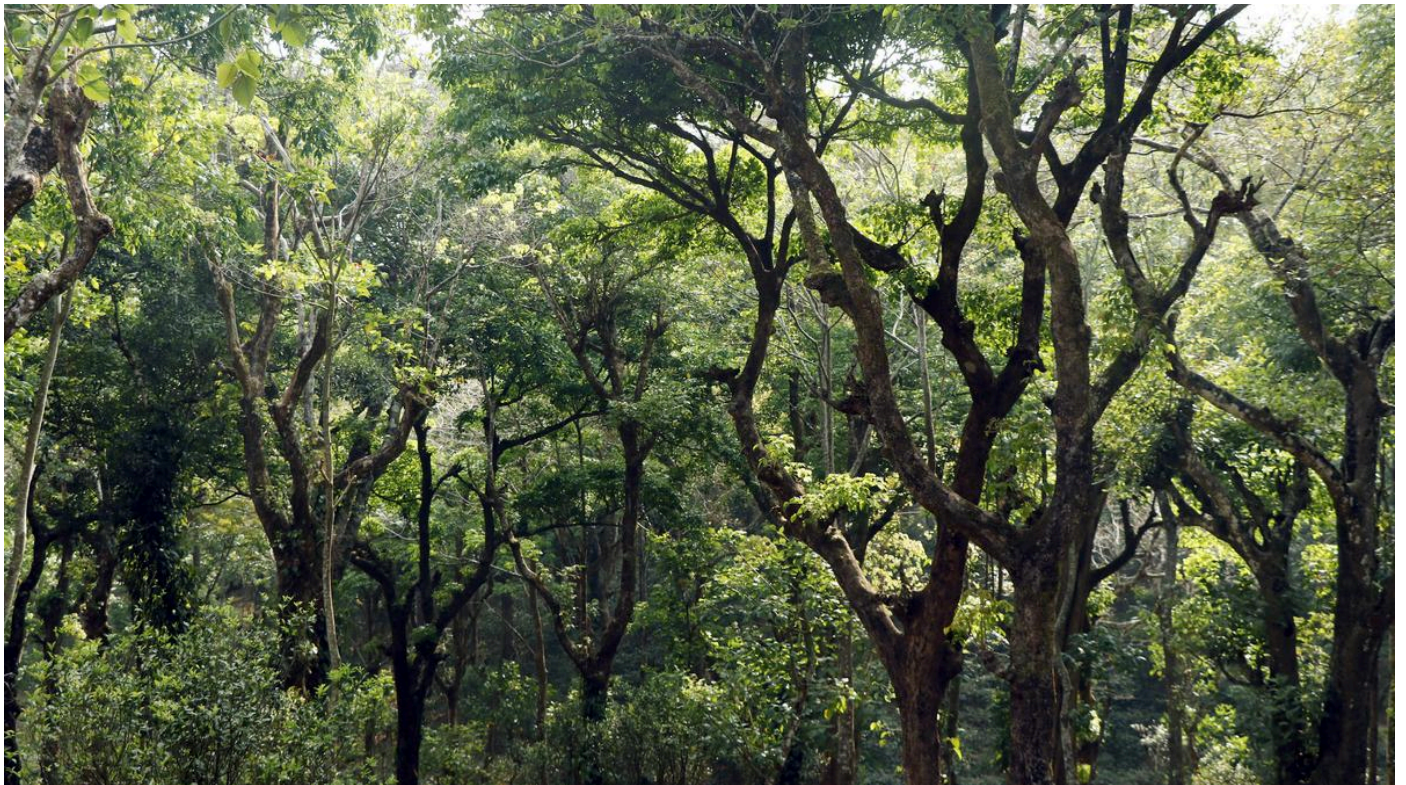


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An apex expert body of the Environment Ministry, which decides on permitting infrastructure development within wildlife habitat, has brought out guidelines that specify conditions under which land inside wildlife parks or sanctuaries may be diverted for religious structures.

This follows a first-of-its-kind instance, when a proposal for land diversion within the Balaram Ambaji Wildlife Sanctuary, Gujarat, came up in early 2024. The sanctuary is host to, according to the State Government, “...two historical temples—Balaram and Ambaji—situated at the opposite corners of the sanctuary.”

## Case in point

In July 2024, the expert body—Standing Committee of the National Board for Wildlife (SCNBWL)—had cleared a proposal by the Pramukhshri Mukundpuriji Maharaj Seva Trust, Palanpur, Gujarat to “use” 0.35 hectares of forest land in the Balaram Ambaji Wildlife Sanctuary after Gujarat’s Chief Wildlife Warden and the State Government approved the proposal, citing the existence of the “establishment” prior to the settlement of forest rights in the region.

However, in October 2024, the SCNBWL decided to revoke a clearance after one of its members, H.S. Singh, said that the right of the Trust on the land had not been recognised or recorded in the forest settlement report or any other government records. Mr. Singh warned that this being the first instance of sanctuary land being considered for allotment to a religious institution, it could set a precedent for similar demands for protected area land. He requested the Committee to reconsider its recommendation.

During deliberations, the Inspector General of Forests noted there were several such sanctuaries across the country where rights and claims had not been settled. Following this, the Chairman of the Committee (Environment Minister Bhupendra Yadav) said there were sacred caves and religious places inside forests and wildlife areas mentioned in religious texts. The followers, he said, had decided to develop these areas as a matter of faith and, therefore, a Standard Operating Procedure be formulated for submission of applications to the Standing Committee involving religious institutions. He suggested that a committee comprising Dr. H. S. Singh and Dr. R. Sukumar may be constituted for that purpose.

## The guidelines

These guidelines—though still being deliberated upon by State Governments—say that as a general principle, any construction or expansion on forest land after 1980 ought to be treated as “encroachment.” A summary of the guidelines was presented before the SCNBWL in its December 2025 meeting, the meeting records note.

However, in exceptional cases where the State has issued a reasoned and documented order justifying proposed regularisation, such cases could be referred to the Ministry for further consideration on a case-by-case basis. Proposals for “expanding area or footprint” would generally not be considered unless for “limited expansion” if it was required for mitigating ecological conflict or creating public utilities to “manage existing pressures.” In the December meeting, the committee also “deferred” a decision on the land diversion proposal (0.16 hectares) in the Jamwaramgarh Wildlife Sanctuary for renovation and maintenance work at Jamwa MataJi Temple, Jamwa Ramgarh, Jaipur.

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