



Nilgiri Elephant Corridor Case

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Why in News

Recently, the **Supreme Court (SC)** appointed a conservationist as Member of a **Technical Committee** constituted in the **October 2020 case** to hear complaints by landowners against sealing of their buildings infringing the **Nilgiri Elephant Corridor** in Tamil Nadu by the state authorities.

Key Points

- **About the October 2020 Case:**
 - In October 2020, **SC had upheld the Tamil Nadu government's authority to notify an 'elephant corridor'** and protect the migratory path of the animals through the **Nilgiri biosphere reserve**.
 - The SC had said it was the State's duty to protect a "**keystone species**" such as elephants, immensely important to the environment.
 - The SC also **allowed the formation of a committee** led by a retired HC judge and two other persons to hear the individual objections of resort owners and private landowners within the corridor space.
 - The SC judgment was based on **appeals filed by resorts/private landowners, against a Madras High Court decision of July 2011.**

- **Madras HC Judgement:**

- In 2011, the Madras HC **upheld the validity of the Tamil Nadu government's notification (of 2010) declaring an 'Elephant Corridor'** in the Sigur Plateau of Nilgiris District.
- It said that the government is fully empowered under the '**Project Elephant**' of the Union government as well as **Article 51 A(g)** of the Constitution to notify the elephant corridor in the state's Nilgiris district.

Article 51 A(g): It shall be the **fundamental duty** of every citizen of India to protect and improve the natural environment including forests, lakes, rivers and wildlife and to have compassion for living creatures.

- Further, it upheld directions to the resort owners and other private landowners to vacate lands falling within the notified **Nilgiri elephant corridor**.

- **Nilgiris Elephant Corridor:**

- The corridor is situated in the ecologically fragile **Sigur plateau, which connects the Western and the Eastern Ghats** and sustains elephant populations and their genetic diversity.

It is situated near the **Mudumalai National Park** in the Nilgiris district.

- It has the Nilgiri hills on its southwestern side and the **Moyar river valley** on its northeastern side. The elephants cross the plateau in search of food and water.
- There are about 100 elephant corridors in India of which almost 70% are used regularly.
 - 75% of the corridors are in the southern, central and north-eastern forests.
 - There are an estimated 6,500 elephants in just the **Brahmagiri-Nilgiris-Eastern Ghats ranges**.

- **Challenges for Elephant Corridors:** ‘Right of Passage’, an 800-page study released in August 2017, authored by experts and published by the **Wildlife Trust of India (WTI)** identifies and records details pertaining to 101 elephant corridors across India.
 - **Narrowing Passage Width:** Only 22% corridors are of a width of one to three kilometres in 2017, compared with 41% in 2005, pointing to how constricted corridors have become in the past 12 years.
 - **Human Encroachment of Corridors:** 21.8% of corridors were free of human settlements in 2017 compared with 22.8% in 2005.
 - **Intercepted Corridors:** About 36.4% of the elephant corridors in northwestern India, 32% in central India, 35.7% in northern West Bengal and 13% of the elephant corridors in northeastern India have a **railway line** passing through them.
 - Almost two-thirds of the corridors have a **National or State Highway** passing through them, fragmenting habitats and hindering elephant movement further.
 - 11% of corridors have canals passing through them.
 - 12% are affected by mining and the extraction of boulders.
 - **Land-use Along Corridors:** In terms of land use, only 12.9% of the corridors are totally under forest cover in 2017 compared with 24% in 2005.

Two in every three elephant corridors in the country are now affected by agricultural activities.

Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve

- **Origin:**
 - The name ‘**Nilgiris**’ with literary meaning ‘**blue mountains**’ has originated from the blue flower clad mountains of the Nilgiris plateau within the State of Tamil Nadu.
 - It was the **first biosphere reserve in India** established in the year 1986.
- **Geography:**
 - The total area of the Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve is 5,520 sq. km.
 - It is **located in the Western Ghats** and encompasses parts of **Tamil Nadu, Kerala and Karnataka.**
- **Ecological Characteristics:**
 - **Confluence of Biotic zones:** It exemplifies the **tropical forest biome** which portrays the **confluence of Afro-tropical and Indo-Malayan biotic zones** of the world.
 - **Biodiversity Hotspot:** Biogeographically, Western Ghats is the most important region and one of the noted **Biodiversity Hotspots** (biogeographic regions having **highest density of endemic species**) for speciation in the tropics.

- **Vegetation:**
 - The NBR harbors a wide spectrum of ecosystem types. Major parts of the core areas spread over Kerala and Tamil Nadu States, include **evergreen, semi evergreen, moist deciduous montane sholas and grassland types of vegetation.**
 - Whereas the core area spread over the State of Karnataka contains mostly **dry deciduous forests and a few patches of moist deciduous, semi evergreen and scrub jungles.**
- **Fauna:**
 - Animals like **Nilgiri tahr, Nilgiri langur, slender loris, blackbuck, tiger, gaur, Indian elephant and marten** are found here.
 - Freshwater fishes such as **Nilgiri danio** (*Devario neilgherriensis*), **Nilgiri barb** (*Hypselobarbus dubuis*) and **Bowany barb** (*Puntius bovanicus*) are endemic to this Biosphere Reserve.
- **Water resources:**

Many of the major tributaries of the river **Cauvery** like the **Bhavani, Moyar, Kabini and other rivers like Chaliyar, Punampuzha**, etc., have their source and catchment areas within the reserve boundary.
- **Tribal Population:**

Tribal groups like the **Todas, Kotas, Irullas, Kurumbas, Paniyas, Adiyans, Edanadan Chettis, Cholanaickens, Allar, Malayan**, etc., are native to the reserve.
- **Protected Areas in NBR:**

The **Mudumalai Wildlife Sanctuary, Wayanad Wildlife Sanctuary, Bandipur National Park, Nagarhole National Park, Mukurthi National Park** and **Silent Valley** are the protected areas present within this reserve.

Source:TH