



Impact of Roads on Wildlife

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The Centre has asked the state of Karnataka to consent to allowing night traffic on the highway passing through Bandipur Tiger Reserve.

Background

- After reports of frequent roadkills in Bandipur, the administration in June 2009 restricted vehicular traffic between 9 pm and 6 am on two national highways passing through the reserve.
 - Protests by Kerala, however, led to the order being withdrawn.
 - After a PIL was filed, Karnataka High Court restored the ban on night traffic in July 2009.
- After the Bandipur matter went to the Supreme Court, the National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA) in a report, in March 2018, recommended maintaining status quo.
- However, before the submission of its report, the Road Transport Ministry asked Karnataka to consent to a proposal to open the road 24×7 with certain mitigation measures like:
 - An elevated road of over four 1-km stretches to provide wildlife passageways below, and
 - Fencing the entire highway passing through the reserve with 8-foot-high steel wire barriers.
- The argument for opening up the restricted road is that the alternative road is 30 km longer, and apparently passes through hilly terrain — increasing travel time, fuel consumption, and pollution.
- Also, it is argued, traffic through a tiger reserve endangers wildlife even during the day, so fencing and passageways are a better idea.

Impact

- The question is whether a 30-km detour to safeguard one of India's most wildlife-rich forests is an unaffordable economic burden or a minor concession necessary in the national interest.
- The impact of road developments on biodiversity has become one of the central environmental issues when planning for road infrastructure.
- Wild animals are vulnerable to vehicular traffic passing through forests, especially at night when, blinded by bright headlights, even swift species like cats freeze.
- Over time, as animals learn to avoid roads, busy multilane highways become barriers that hinder wildlife movement, fragment populations, and restrict gene flow.
- By blocking access to potential habitats, roads, railway lines and irrigation canals act as a major contributor to habitat loss.

India's Policy

- In September 2013, the National Board for Wildlife (NBWL), the apex advisory body to the central government on all wildlife-related matters, said no to new roads through protected forests.
 - However, it was open to the widening of existing roads with adequate mitigation measures irrespective of the cost, only if alternative alignments were not available.
 - The government accepted this as policy in December 2014.
- In February 2018, the NBWL made it mandatory for every road/rail project proposal to include a wildlife passage plan as per guidelines framed by Wildlife Institute of India, an autonomous wildlife research body under the Environment Ministry.
 - However, features like underpasses are unlikely to suffice in dense wildlife-rich forests where too many animals compete for space.

National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA)

NTCA is a statutory body under the Ministry of Environment, Forests and Climate Change constituted under enabling provisions of the Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972 for strengthening tiger conservation.

National Board for Wildlife (NBWL)

- National Board for Wildlife is a statutory Board constituted officially in 2003 under the Wild Life (Protection) Act, 1972.
- The NBWL is chaired by the Hon'ble Prime Minister and is responsible for promotion of conservation and development of wildlife and forests.
- The board is 'advisory' in nature and can only advise the Government on policy making for conservation of wildlife.

- It is an important body because it serves as an apex body for the review of all wildlife-related matters and for the approval of projects in and around national parks and sanctuaries

Bandipur Tiger Reserve