



Mid-Day

Mumbai: Locals, activists to march against illegal construction in SGNP

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28-Jan-2016



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Work continues at the Yeoor side of the national park, despite warnings from the National Green Tribunal, High Court and Thane collector

Not even a directive from the High Court or a warning from the Thane collector has managed to check the illegal construction eating into the Sanjay Gandhi National Park on the Yeoor Hills side, but locals and activists now hope to generate more awareness with a peace march to protest the rampant encroachment there.

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Activists from the Yeoor Environmental Society (YES) will tomorrow join hands with tribal residents in the area for a protest march from Yeoor to the Collector's office

Society is losing the forests and wildlife to illegal construction taking place at Yeoor, which is within the limits of SGNP. Even though the National Green Tribunal (NGT) and the Bombay High Court had ordered the developer to stop a week ago, the construction is continuing and is affecting the forest and its biodiversity, said Meet Ashar, a member of YES who is also an Animal Welfare Officer appointed by the high court.

The developer has illegally staked claim on a chunk of land within the SGNP perimeter, building a wall around it and dumping construction material there. Not only does this illegal construction threaten the local wildlife in the national park, the wall also blocks access to the tribal residents in Yeoor, forcing them to walk an extra kilometre around the wall. This is posing a problem particularly to schoolchildren. But with the construction continuing unabated, the tribals are now worried the developer may next target their village, where many families have been residing for over a century.

After receiving complaints from activists, Thane collector Ashwini Joshi visited the site ten days ago and issued a warning to the developer. She also instructed the tehsildar to maintain follow-up, but this did not have any effect.

“The collector had visited the site recently and asked that the construction be stopped, but her instruction fell on deaf ears. The construction is in full swing. The Yeoor part of Sanjay Gandhi National Park is among the few remaining forest areas in city limits; the fresh air we breathe in the city comes from here. We must protect and preserve it and we will protest to open the eyes of the authorities who are neglecting it,” added Ashar.

Speaking to mid-day, the Collector said, “Firstly, we have to free the access route for the villagers so they don’t face daily problems. The developer claims that he took the land on lease from a government firm. I have asked the local tehsildar regularly visit the site and ensure that the construction stops.”

According to environmentalist Stalin Dayanand, who is part of the NGO Vanashakti, the developer has not shown any documents to prove that he has permission for construction there. “We had filed a PIL in the high court in November against de-forestation and movement of dumpers inside the national park. The NGT asked the Forest Department to keep tabs and produce all the records regarding the land across the Yeoor stretch. The developer claims he had some permission for the land, but we are suspicious as he never showed the documents. He is doing this illegally; how can forest land be approved for the construction purpose? The government should take strict action,” he said.