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Bondla on course for enhanced protection

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A proposal to consider the grant of critical wildlife habitat (CWH) status to one of Goa's first wildlife sanctuaries at Bondla may sail through as residents of the adjoining villages of Usgao-Ganjem, Guleli and Dharbandora have not raised any major objections to the intended declaration.

"The process is almost complete and we will submit the proposal to the Central government after the stipulated period of 30 days ends," said Debendra Dalai, convener of the state level expert committee (SLEC). "The villagers have understood the facts and have given a green signal to the proposal."

After a similar exercise to grant CWH status to the Salim Ali bird sanctuary at Chorao kicked off a storm at a public hearing last month, as villagers demanded a detailed explanation of the concept, the panel conducted a hearing at three panchayats on Tuesday in respect of Bondla wildlife sanctuary. However, it did not encounter any opposition from the respective gram sabhas, sources said.

Agrees deputy sarpanch of Usgao-Ganjem panchayat Kanta Gawde, "We are not opposed to the proposal, but villagers want to see the maps to look at the boundaries properly so that there are no problems in future." The wildlife sanctuary carved out more than four decades ago spans 7.95 sq kms and skirts Ganjem on the banks of River Mhadei on its north-eastern side. Towards the west, it abuts Shrivdem ward of Dharbandora, and Paikul, Conquerim and Guleli areas towards the north.

The CWH proposal has a two-pronged strategy of protecting flora and fauna and also granting the traditional rights of scheduled tribes and other forest dwellers under the Scheduled Tribes and Other Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act 2006. However, in Usgao, a habitation of scheduled tribes is located away from Ganjem. "We have not received any claims of any rights within the sanctuary," another official said.

Protection of Goa's flora and fauna received a fillip after the Goa, Daman and Diu Wild Birds and Animals Act, 1965 was passed and Bondla, Molem and Cotigao were carved out as wildlife sanctuaries a couple of years later in 1967.

"Dharbandora village panchayat has handed us the NOC-a resolution passed by the body," Dalai said.

Explaining that the SLEC's work is facilitated as there are no habitations within the limits, the convener added, "The fear is more about the carving out of a buffer zone around the sanctuary, but there is no such proposal, and that means no acquisition of more land, so people are relieved."

In Guleli, a villager had claimed that he had cashew plantations close to the sanctuary. "If he had cashew plantations, he should know the boundaries of his own properties," argued a source from the forest department. Dalai added that maps of the Bondla wildlife sanctuary have been kept at the panchayats for the perusal of stakeholders.

Another participant who, though did not raise any issue related to the CWH, expressed the view, at two of hearings in Usgao-Ganjem and Guleli, that wherever tribals lived the patches of forests had been well protected from deforestation.

Dalai said that villagers can still clarify any doubts, even at this juncture.

"The proposal to grant CWH status to Bondla will be next submitted to Central government," he said, adding that there is also a Central level committee examining proposals from all over the country.

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