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Community support needed to conserve biodiversity: Jairam Ramesh

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COIMBATORE: Union Minister of State for Environment and Forest, Jairam Ramesh called for community participation to conserve biodiversity and to protect the environment.

Speaking to reporters at Salim Ali Centre of Ornithology and Natural History (Sacon), Mr Ramesh said poaching and poisoning of tigers is a serious issue in India. "In order to control it, we are setting up protection forces involving local communities apart from upgrading wildlife crime control bureau," he added.

He said, out of 37 tiger reserves in India, only 9 are in good shape, 10 in satisfactory condition and remaining in precarious situation. Also, there are only 1200 to 1400 tigers in the wild now.

Mr Ramesh said the ministry is looking forward to amend the Wildlife Protection Act 1972 by initiating a stringent punishment for crime caused to wildlife. "As like FEMA Act or Money Laundering Act, the punishment for crime caused to wildlife should also be severe. We have already done some changes to the old act and has circulated it to all states for inputs," he added.

He said, police alone cannot safeguard wildlife and forest but, the local communities should also take some interest in preserving the same. As an experiment, the forest officials have started involving local Gujjars for social enforcement in Corbett National Park. The minister is also looking to involve the local communities in other parts of the country to protect the environment.

He cited an example of how Sacon is working with social communities including church groups and students to increase awareness of hornbill, which is almost extinct in Nagaland. Another example for sustainability was the work of Sacon at Andaman and Nicobar valley, where they preserve edible-nest swiftlet, a valuable bird that is currently on smuggling net.

Earlier Mr Ramesh released a wetlands atlas of India, which was prepared by Sacon based on satellite imagery. "There are over 60,000 inland wetlands present in India spread over 7 million hectares. These wetlands are on great threat from real estate people. So the local community and local administration should take steps to protect them," he said.

Regarding the proposal of setting up a neutrino observatory at Singara in Nilgiris, Mr Ramesh said, "after spending almost two months on the subject, I have come to a conclusion that Singara cannot be permitted.

It is now a closed chapter."

He said, the observatory is very important for both theoretical and experimental physics but when matter was evenly balanced, he had to yearn on the side of environment. He added there would have been a four-year period of considerable disturbances in that area with serious implications on the corridor if the project had been given a go-ahead.

Box Item:

Mr Jairam Ramesh said Institute of Forest Genetics and Tree Breeding, Coimbatore will introduce four clones each of Eucalyptus and Casuarina by March 2010 for commercial cultivation. "The college is also working on GM Eucalyptus, where genes are introduced to make it salt tolerant. The new variety would be ready for field trials in four years time," he added.

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