

# WHY ARMED POLICEMEN PATROL ODISHA'S MANGROVES

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Police do the rounds on a country boat in Kendrapara district | Photo Credit: [Biswaranjan Rout](#)

The boat meanders through a thicket of mangroves and mudflats where estuarine crocodiles bask in the sun.

Dambarudhar Soren, a constable with the Odisha police, is far from enjoying this boat ride off Odisha's Kendrapara coast. He is on high alert. Soren is part of a team of armed force of police and forest personnel that regularly patrols the waters of the Bay of Bengal against any threat to the mangrove forest from the aquaculture mafia.

Police personnel patrolling in the forest carrying rifles on their shoulder and looking for smugglers may appear to be a fancy idea. But for the forest department, an armed police patrol force is a much-needed last resort to ward off enemies of the mangroves. The mangrove ecosystem plays a vital role in protecting the land against the ingress of sea water during a tidal surge. It's an invaluable eco-wall and so , and armed police have had to be roped in. It's been done, albeit rarely, in other parts of the country too.

In Kendrapara, powerful prawn mafias have for decades illegally occupied vast stretches of area after clearing mangrove forests. Aquaculture is lucrative business: it gets very high returns, on minimal investment. An investment of 1 lakh in an acre of land is all you need to get a fish catch worth 5 lakh in six months. This is why there is always a race to clear mangroves and convert it into fish ponds.

The forest department began a systematic operation to drive away away the prawn mafia years ago, but noticed that they would soon be back to reoccupy the same area. "The department came up with the idea of planting saplings on the land after evicting illegal occupants. It worked. Hectares of forest cleared by the mafia returned to its earlier shape and became forested again," says Bimal Prasanna Acharya, the divisional forest officer of the Rajanagar mangrove division.

But the problem is more complex. It takes five years for saplings to turn into a five-foot-tall tree. "And since the threat of armed encroachers remained, we decided to take the help of the police. Police patrolling did instil some fear and our objective was met," said Bijay Kumar Parida, assistant conservator of forest of Mahakalapada forest range, who was instrumental in turning aquaculture ponds into forest land.

Over the last decade, 1,930 hectares of forest in Mahakalapada forest range have been cleared of encroachment. Over 400 hectares remain under illegal occupation.

Odisha has 220 sq. km. of mangrove forest spread across four coastal districts — Kendrapara, Jagatsinghpur, Bhadrak and Balasore. The Mahakalapada forest is part of Bhitarkanika National Park, which is considered to have the most biodiverse mangrove vegetation in the world, second only to Papua New Guinea, with 64 species of flora recorded. It happens to be India's second largest mangrove forest after the Sundarbans.

The mangrove plays a vital role in protecting the coast as well as in sustaining the livelihood of local fishermen. "Wherever there is dense mangrove vegetation, the impact of cyclones is less.

For instance, the 1999 super cyclone had comparatively less impact in the Mahakalapada area of Kendrapara because the mangrove acted as a barrier,” says Ajay Parida, director of Institute of Life Sciences, Bhubaneswar.

But, he says, the “involvement of the police in forest protection cannot be a long-term solution. We need to make the local community partners in our efforts.” Odisha must also use its remote sensing agency to map mangrove vegetation in order to chalk out a comprehensive conservation plan.

“The government should assess the loss and take steps to prevent further destruction. Restoration of mangroves can only happen with the participation of the community,” says Parida.

Soren meanwhile admits that while there is no joy in patrolling these mangroves, “knowing that I am helping the forest grow gives me immense satisfaction.”

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An environment clearance to the Mumbai-Ahmedabad high-speed train corridor has put the spotlight on the Thane Creek Flamingo Sanctuary (TCFS) in Mumbai.

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