

# PENCH TIGER RESERVE STARTS DAIRY PROJECT IN BUFFER ZONE TO REDUCE PRESSURE ON FOREST AREAS

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The Pench Tiger Reserve in Maharashtra's Nagpur district has started a cooperative dairy project in its buffer zone to enhance the livelihood of people living there and reduce the pressure on the protected forest, officials said.

Under the project, 40 high-yielding milch cattle have been distributed in Awaleghat, Makardhokda and Chargaon villages and a milk collection centre has been established at Awaleghat, a release by Pench tiger Reserve, Maharashtra, deputy director Prabhu Nath Shukla said on June 3.

Apart from helping the villagers earn more, the move is also aimed at stopping cattle from grazing in the forest by promoting stall feeding and reducing potential conflicts with wild animals, he said.

The Pench reserve, which derives its name from the river Pench, is spread over 741.41 square kilometres. At last count, it had 41 tigers, said officials.

Mr. Shukla said the project has come up with funding of 25 lakh from the Forest Development Corporation Of Maharashtra under its corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiative.

The villagers have formed a cooperative society named 'Shiv Swarajya Sahakari Sansthan' and have tied up with Nagpur-based 'Nutan Path Sansthan' to sell milk. The society is also registered with the country's food safety regulator Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI), the release said.

Mr. Shukla said the society plans to have *paneer* (cottage cheese) and ice cream-making units at the collection centre and is trying to add more members. The forest department is in the process of getting financial support from other sources to increase the number of beneficiaries.

To enhance the effect of this initiative on the protected forest, Mr. Shukla said, only stall feeding is being allowed and cattle have been given to those who have started fodder farming.

The idea is to ensure the cattle do not enter the forest again for grazing, he said.

The forest department is trying to cover more families and is giving one cattle per family. Besides, the families have to first make a fodder bank before getting the cattle.

“This project is going to create a snowball effect in the buffer region of Pench. It will enhance the livelihood standard of the people, will create a better interface with them and reduce the pressure on forest areas,” Mr. Shukla added.

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