

# CENTRAL PANEL TO PROBE 'ILLEGAL' FELLING OF TREES IN CORBETT NATIONAL PARK

Relevant for: Environment | Topic: Biodiversity, Ecology, and Wildlife Related Issues

Habitat protection is key for tigers to thrive in the wild. Getty Images/ISTockPhoto

The National Green Tribunal (NGT) on Friday told the forest officials of Uttarakhand that it would direct the Union government to form a committee to initiate an investigation into "illegal tree cutting" in Jim Corbett National Park.

The apex green court's move came after it had taken cognisance of *The Hindu's* report on the felling of trees in the Corbett Tiger Reserve (CTR). The report had quoted a Forest Survey of India (FSI) report stating that over 6,000 trees were illegally cut to pave the way for the Pakhro tiger safari project at the tiger reserve.

Samir Sinha, Chief Wildlife Warden of Uttarakhand, who appeared before the NGT on Friday, told *The Hindu* that the State government had informed the court about the steps taken by the government over the "alleged illegal tree cutting". "The court said it would direct the Centre to form a committee to investigate the allegations," Mr. Sinha said.

Vinod Singhal, the Principal Chief Conservator of Forest and Head of the Forest Force, said the forest department had permission to cut only 163 trees for the safari project, but during preliminary investigation, it was found that 97 extra trees were illegally cut in the area.

The fact that thousands of trees had been cut for the project was highlighted by Gaurav Bansal, an environment activist and lawyer based in Delhi. In a complaint to the National Tiger Conservation Authority, he alleged that a large number of trees were axed in the protected area.

Taking cognisance of the complaint, the State government asked the FSI to conduct a survey of the number of trees felled in the designated area for the Pakhru tiger safari project inside the tiger reserve. The Forest Survey Institute was also tasked with scanning the area for illegal felling and change in forest cover in the Kalagarh forest division.

Over nine months, the FSI compiled a report on the tree cover in the Pakhro, Kalushaheed, Nalkhatta, and Kalagarh ranges in the forest area.

The report, which was published in September, observed that 6,093 trees had been illegally felled in the tiger reserve, a senior official of the Uttarakhand forest department, who did not wish to be named, told *The Hindu*. According to the report, around 16.21 hectares of land in CTR had also been allegedly cleared by forest officials.

## 'Can't accept report'

The State forest department, however, refuted the FSI's claims and said there were some technical issues that needed to be resolved before the report could be accepted. Mr. Singhal accepted that the FSI report found that over 6,000 trees were illegally cut, but maintained that the forest department had some issues with the report and had not accepted it yet.

Former State Forest Minister Harak Singh Rawat had laid the foundation stone for the Pakhro tiger safari project in December 2020. He said the project, spread over 106 hectares, would be

the State's first tiger safari and the world's longest. He said "100% sighting" of tigers would be ensured at the safari.

Even Prime Minister Narendra Modi, during his visit to the Jim Corbett National Park in 2019 for the shooting of the adventure TV show *Man Vs Wild* with host Bear Grylls, had spoken about developing a safari in the area to enable visitors to have confirmed tiger sightings.

Spread across 500 sq. km, the reserve is home to 230 tigers and has the world's highest tiger density — at 14 tigers per hundred sq. km.

The NGT took cognisance of the matter following a report published in *The Hindu* and said it would direct the Union government to form the committee

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