

Make Aarey eco-sensitive zone, Centre orders NGT

Badri Chatterjee, Hindustan Times, Mumbai | Updated: Jan 20, 2016 01:02 IST

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Activities which damage the environment are likely to be regulated at Aarey Milk Colony, one of the city's green lungs.

On Tuesday, the Union environment ministry told the National Green Tribunal (NGT) that Aarey forms an ecologically sensitive zone (ESZ) around the Sanjay Gandhi National Park. The ministry will now communicate its decision to the Supreme Court.

"As per the proposal approved by the ministry, the extent of eco-sensitive zone is up to 4 kilometres from the boundary of Sanjay Gandhi National Park. The eco-sensitive zone is spread over an area of 6110.629 hectares," stated the affidavit submitted by Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change.

The affidavit filed before the western bench of Justice UD Salvi and judicial member Ajay Deshpande read, "The parameters are in the final stage of examination before they are filed before the Supreme Court for its approval. Once the approval is obtained, then a decision to apply these parameters in the context of the Aarey land could be taken up."

The ministry's decision to declare Aarey as an ecologically sensitive zone got a push after NGOs Vanashakti and Aarey Conservation Group filed a petition in August, seeking protection for the area and keeping it as a no-development zone. The NGOs made the move after Mumbai Metro Rail Corporation (MMRC) decided to construct 16 stabling lines for the Metro rail project in 10 hectares of land.

In 2013, the Supreme Court had issued an ultimatum to the state governments that a 10-km buffer zone be demarcated around all national parks and wildlife sanctuaries. On November 4 last year, the Maharashtra government submitted a proposal to the environment ministry to include Aarey as an ESZ.

Environmentalists said that declaring Aarey as an ESZ would mean no environmentally damaging activities can be carried out and the area would boost eco-tourism.

"Aarey has not yet been declared as eco-sensitive zone," said Ashwini Bhide, managing director, MMRC. "Even if Aarey gets the ESZ tag, carrying out construction of the metro depot is not prohibited. We only need to take permission from the tree authority for cutting trees, for which we have already applied. However, it is on hold due to NGT's interim order."

"It is the MMRC's responsibility to see that open spaces and green zones of Mumbai are maintained and the Aarey landscape is protected as it has a rich biodiversity," said Stalin Dayanand, director of Vanashakti," said Stalin Dayanand, director of Vanashakti