

REVISION GUIDELINES OF ECO-SENSITIVE ZONE: ENVIRONMENT

NEWS: Wildlife board panel to revisit guidelines on declaring ESZs around national parks, sanctuaries; make them more site-specific

WHAT'S IN THE NEWS?

Eco-Sensitive Zones (ESZs) are ecologically important buffers around Protected Areas, notified under the Environment (Protection) Act, 1986, to regulate development and conserve biodiversity. The National Board for Wildlife (NBWL), chaired by the Prime Minister, advises the government on wildlife conservation and approves changes in Protected Area boundaries.

Context: Revision of 2011 ESZ Guidelines by SC-NBWL

- The **Standing Committee of the National Board for Wildlife (SC-NBWL)**, chaired by the **Union Environment Minister**, has decided to revise the 2011 guidelines related to Eco-Sensitive Zones (ESZs).
- Aim: To make ESZ regulations **site-specific**, and **sensitive to local ecological and socio-economic contexts**.
- Reason:
 - **Rigid norms** (e.g., uniform 10-km radius) are impractical in certain geographies.
 - For example, **Himachal Pradesh**, with **65% forest cover**, may face developmental hurdles due to over-restrictive rules.
 - Urban areas like **Sanjay Gandhi National Park (Mumbai)** and **Asola Bhatti Sanctuary (Delhi)** cannot accommodate a 10-km ESZ due to high population density and infrastructure.

What are Eco-Sensitive Zones (ESZs)?

Definition and Scope

- Concept proposed at the **XXI Meeting of the Indian Board for Wildlife (IBWL)** on **January 21, 2002**.
- Formalized under the **National Wildlife Action Plan (2002–2016)** by the **Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEF&CC)**.
- As per **National Environment Policy (2006)**:
ESZs are “**areas with unique environmental resources**” that need special attention due to:
 - Rich biodiversity
 - Wildlife habitat
 - Historical or cultural significance
 - Ecological fragility
 - Scenic landscapes

Legal Backing

- **Notified under the Environment (Protection) Act, 1986.**
- Empowerment: **Union Government** has the authority to notify ESZs.

Demarcation

- **General guideline:** Land within **10 km radius** of National Parks and Wildlife Sanctuaries is designated as ESZ.
- However, this **10-km buffer is not mandatory**; it can be:
 - **Reduced** in urbanised or developed areas.
 - **Extended beyond 10 km** in ecologically sensitive corridors.
- Requires site-specific assessment and recommendation from state governments.

Purpose of ESZs

Buffer Function

- ESZs act as “**shock absorbers**” between core protected areas (PAs) and human habitations.
- Prevent ecological damage from urbanisation or industrial activities near parks.

Ecological Safeguard

- Control and regulate human activities to prevent **disturbance to wildlife** and habitats.

Ecological Transition Zones

- Serve as intermediate zones between **areas of high protection (PAs)** and **lower protection (rural or urban lands)**.

Sustainable Coexistence

- Aim to maintain **harmony between nature and people** by:
 - Promoting environmentally sustainable practices.
 - Ensuring that **local livelihoods are not harmed**.

Regulation of Activities in ESZs

Framework by 2011 Guidelines

- Guidelines provide an **indicative structure** for states to follow in notifying and managing ESZs.

- Activities around PAs are grouped into:
 - **Prohibited**
 - **Regulated**
 - **Permitted**
 - **Promoted**

Prohibited Activities

- Commercial mining
- Operation of saw mills
- Commercial use of timber and wood
- Establishment of major hydroelectric projects

Regulated Activities

- Tree felling (requires permission)
- Construction of hotels, resorts
- Roads, electrical and communication towers
- Infrastructure development (schools, hospitals, etc.)

Permitted Activities

- Ongoing agriculture and horticulture
- Organic farming
- Rainwater harvesting
- Routine practices of local communities, **as long as they don't harm the ecosystem**

Zonal Master Plan

- Mandatory for every ESZ.
- To be prepared by **State Governments**, incorporating:
 - Land use patterns
 - Tourism Master Plan
 - Heritage and cultural site preservation
- Serves as the **guiding document** for regulating development and conservation.

Current Status of ESZ Notifications

- In the absence of demarcated ESZs, the **Supreme Court (2022)** had ordered that a **minimum 1-km ESZ** must be maintained around all protected areas, unless specifically notified.
- As of recent **Rajya Sabha data**, the **MoEF&CC has issued 347 final ESZ notifications**.
- However, several protected areas are still awaiting final demarcation or have disputes regarding boundary overlaps with habitations.

National Board for Wildlife (NBWL)

Establishment

- Formed in **2003** through amendment to the **Wild Life (Protection) Act, 1972**.
- Replaced and restructured the earlier **Indian Board for Wildlife (IBWL)**.

Function

- Serves as the **apex advisory body on wildlife conservation** in India.
- Advises the **Central Government** on policies related to:
 - Wildlife protection
 - Approval for development projects in or near Protected Areas (PAs)
 - Framing of guidelines for PAs and wildlife corridors

Mandatory Functions

- NBWL's **approval is compulsory** for:
 - Alteration of boundaries of PAs
 - Diversion or destruction of wildlife habitat
 - De-notification of Tiger Reserves
 - Establishment of tourist lodges inside sanctuaries or national parks

Standing Committee of NBWL (SC-NBWL)

Structure and Role

- Functions as an **independent and empowered sub-body** under NBWL.
- **Chaired by the Union Environment Minister**.
- Meets regularly to:
 - Evaluate proposals for developmental projects affecting wildlife

- Review ESZ guidelines and policy implementation
- Issue site-specific recommendations

Composition of NBWL

Chairperson

- **Prime Minister of India**

Vice-Chairperson

- **Union Minister for Environment, Forest and Climate Change**

Other Members

- **Chief of the Army Staff**
- **Secretaries of key ministries:**
 1. Defence
 2. Finance
 3. Tribal Affairs
 4. Information & Broadcasting
- **3 Members of Parliament:**
 - 3 from **Lok Sabha**
 - 1 from **Rajya Sabha**
- **Director General of Forests**
- **10 eminent conservationists and ecologists**
- **5 NGO representatives** working in the wildlife conservation domain

Source: <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/wildlife-board-panel-to-revisit-guidelines-on-declaring-eszs-around-national-parks-sanctuaries-make-them-more-site-specific-10122225/>