

SUNDARBANS TIGER RESERVE – ENVIRONMENT

The Sundarbans Tiger Reserve in West Bengal has become India's second-largest tiger reserve, after Nagarjunasagar-Srisailem TR, Andhra Pradesh.

Sundarbans Tiger Reserve – India's Second-Largest Tiger Reserve

The Sundarbans Tiger Reserve (STR) in West Bengal has now become India's second-largest tiger reserve, after the Nagarjunasagar-Srisailem Tiger Reserve in Andhra Pradesh. This new status follows the approval of the National Board for Wildlife (NBWL) to expand the reserve by 1,044.68 sq km, making its total area 3,629.57 sq km. The expansion has included three important tiger-inhabited forest ranges from South 24 Parganas district – Matla, Raidighi, and Ramganga, further strengthening the protected area network.

Geographical Location & Landscape

STR is located in the coastal districts of South and North 24-Parganas, West Bengal, at the southernmost tip of the Lower Gangetic Delta bordering the Bay of Bengal. It forms part of the world's largest delta, the Sundarbans, which is created by the confluence of the Ganga and Brahmaputra rivers before draining into the sea. The landscape is a labyrinth of estuaries, tidal rivers, creeks, and mudflats interspersed with 105 islands of varying sizes. It is the only mangrove forest in the world (shared with Bangladesh) that harbors a significant wild population of tigers.

Boundaries of the Reserve

East – International border with Bangladesh, marked by rivers such as Harinbanga, Raimangal, and Kalindi.

South – The Bay of Bengal, making STR highly vulnerable to cyclones and sea-level rise.

West – River Matla, forming the boundary with South 24-Parganas Forest Division.

North-West – Bidya and Gomdi rivers, connecting the Sundarbans to other parts of the deltaic system.

Ecological Features

Flora – The reserve supports true mangroves (Sundari, Heritiera, Avicennia, Rhizophora), mangrove associates, salt-tolerant herbs, shrubs, weeds, epiphytes, and parasitic plants.

Fauna –

Flagship Species – The Royal Bengal Tiger, well adapted to saline and swampy ecosystems (estimated ~101 individuals as per 2022 census).

Other Mammals – Fishing cat, smooth-coated otter, wild boar, rhesus macaque.

Reptiles – Estuarine crocodile, king cobra, water monitor lizard.

Aquatic Fauna – Gangetic dolphin, Irrawaddy dolphin, numerous fish species.

Birds – A variety of resident and migratory birds including storks, herons, egrets, and kingfishers.

Significance of the Expansion

Conservation Value – Expansion strengthens tiger conservation efforts in a globally unique mangrove ecosystem, reducing fragmentation and increasing prey base areas.

Climate Resilience – The Sundarbans act as a natural barrier against cyclones, tidal surges, and floods, protecting human habitations while also serving as a major carbon sink.

International Importance – It is the world's only transboundary tiger reserve, shared between India and Bangladesh, with global recognition as a UNESCO World Heritage Site and a Ramsar Wetland Site.

Livelihood Concerns – Expansion has raised concerns among local fishermen and forest-dependent communities about reduced access to forest and river resources. However, the government has clarified that buffer zone rights and traditional livelihood activities will continue.

About National Board for Wildlife (NBWL)

Statutory Status – NBWL is a statutory body established under Section 5A of the Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972 (WLPA), created after the 2022 amendment.

Historical Background – It replaced the Indian Board for Wildlife, which was originally formed in 1952 as an advisory forum.

Primary Role – The NBWL provides policy guidance, conservation advice, and mandatory approvals for projects that affect wildlife habitats.

Powers & Mandatory Approvals of NBWL under WLPA

Altering the boundaries of national parks, wildlife sanctuaries, or tiger reserves. De-notification of tiger reserves or reducing their area. Approving construction of tourist lodges, roads, and other structures inside protected areas. Permitting diversion or destruction of wildlife habitats for large-scale infrastructure, mining, irrigation, or industrial projects.

Organizational Structure of NBWL

Chairperson – The Prime Minister of India.

Vice-Chairperson – The Union Minister of Environment, Forests & Climate Change.

Member-Secretary – Additional Director General of Forests (Wildlife) and Director, Wildlife Preservation.

Other Members

1. 3 Members of Parliament (2 Lok Sabha, 1 Rajya Sabha).
2. 5 representatives from NGOs working in wildlife conservation.
3. 10 eminent conservationists, ecologists, and environmentalists.
4. Government secretaries from various ministries (Defence, Tribal Affairs, Tourism, Agriculture, etc.).
5. Chief of Army Staff, Director General of Forests, and other senior officials.

Standing Committee of NBWL

Functions as an independent body under NBWL, handling project-level clearances.

Composition – Up to 10 members chosen from NBWL.

Chairperson – Union Minister of Environment, Forest, and Climate Change.

Key Difference from NBWL

NBWL – Deals with broad policy formulation and wildlife strategy.

Standing Committee – Focuses on approving or rejecting specific projects that require wildlife habitat diversion or use.

Source: <https://www.downtoearth.org.in/wildlife-biodiversity/sundarbans-tiger-reserve-now-indias-second-largest-after-national-board-for-wildlife-approves-bengals-proposal-to-increase-area>