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## IN PERSPECTIVE

### All forest fires are man-made

**There is need to check the machinations of the timber lobby to protect the forests, particularly wildlife reserves**

**BY PRAVEEN BHARGAV**

From a vantage point in the forest I watched a huge fire rapidly engulf the deciduous forests of Bhadra Tiger Reserve in March 2004. As the flames started leaping over the under storey, birds like the Indian Roller and the Drongo were diving into the fire to catch insects that were being flushed out by the searing flames. While this was a disturbing sight, what was even more shocking was the fact that elements of the timber lobby were also opportunistically diving in to cleverly use the fires as an alibi to restart timber and bamboo extraction.

Surely, these powerful vested interests, after having been thwarted by the apex court on a plea by conservationists, are not willing to keep quiet. And with this year's fire season rapidly approaching, danger is lurking round the corner again.

There is a misconception that fires occur naturally in forests. While this is true in the case of temperate forests where crown fires are caused by lightning in summer which ignites the resin in trees, fires in deciduous forests are all man-made. They are either caused by people trying to encroach and exploit forests, or by cattle grazers or minor forest produce collectors.

#### **Devastating impact**

Whatever the reason, the impact of such annual forest fires resulting from arson on wildlife and its habitat is devastating. What it does is gradually remove many trees and useful under storey plants which are unable to resist fires and replace them with thick barked, inedible species. Fire also destroys ground nesting birds, reptiles and even young ones of deer and the tiger. With the thick carpet of fallen leaves on the forest floor, which acts as huge water sponges, getting burnt, the amount of water that these forests store is greatly affected.

Concerned with the deteriorating protection of wildlife and forests, the Supreme Court of India has, since 1996, delivered several landmark orders in the famous forest case — Writ Petition 202/95. The Supreme Court also constituted the Central Empowered Committee (CEC) to assist in dealing with

this forest case.

In February 2000, the Supreme Court banned the removal of dead, dying or wind fallen trees, drift wood and grass from all wildlife reserves. This order of the apex court effectively blocked the machinations of forest departments across the country. Subsequent efforts to impress the apex court on the need to relax the ban on removal of timber and bamboo have been futile with the court and the Central Empowered Committee standing firm.

Undeterred, covert attempts to restart exploitation of timber and bamboo from wildlife reserves which constitute just 3 per cent of India's landscape, continue. One such attempt to overcome the legal roadblock has been to highlight the threat of forest fire. Dead bamboo and trees are cited as a fire hazard. It is common knowledge that while dry bamboo is indeed combustible, it is certainly not 'self combustible'.

### **Ludicrous suggestion**

Further, in many reserved forest areas where such exploitation continues, extensive forest fires have occurred. Therefore, the 'ad hoc' suggestion made by the Karnataka Principal Chief Conservator of Forests to the Government in March 2004 to seriously review the policy of non-removal of timber and bamboo, merely based on the threat of forest fire, is ludicrous — as ludicrous as the Chief of the Fire Force seeking a stoppage of all LPG supplies in summer on the ground that transportation and storage of LPG would be a fire hazard which the fire force cannot deal with. In any case, would such a policy come along with a clear assurance that there will be 'zero fires' if such salvage logging is allowed?

A system of accurate assessment of annual fires must be made mandatory. Every ranger must be directed to accurately report the number of fire incidents, the cause and the extent of area burnt. During the first year a good baseline for each range has to be established after cross verifying the reported extent with satellite imagery which is now extremely accurate. This data can then be used as a tool to monitor and establish proper accountability of officials.

The world has moved away from the paradigm of revenue generation forestry in wildlife reserves. It is for this reason that large international agencies like the World Bank, ODA, Japan Bank for Industrial Cooperation (JBIC) and others have provided/committed whopping sums of money amounting to over a Rs 1000 crore in the last ten years to the Karnataka Forest Department for raising wood and bamboo stock in degraded forest and community lands to reduce pressure on natural forests. And yet, strangely, the PCCF recommends exploitation from wildlife reserves/forests under the garb of fire protection.

In the larger interest of conserving our last remaining biodiversity bastions which are crucial water catchments as well, officials must rise above extraction issues and stop appeasing the timber lobby.

*(Wildlife First Features).*