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## Prevention Through Preparedness And Continuous Vigil Is Key To Fighting Forest Fires, Says Conservationist Praveen Bhargav

On February 18, 2017, a raging fire in Bandipur National Park, Karnataka, not only ravaged 750 acres of forest, reducing it to ashes, but also caused the tragic death of a 28-year-old forest guard, Murigeppa Tammangol. This instance points out the neglect India's green army is subjected to, even when they form the frontline of our defence against forest destruction and wildlife poaching.



Photo: Ramesh Belagere.

While scrutinising the situation, Praveen Bhargav, trustee of Wildlife First, quotes the military adage 'The more you sweat in peace, the less you bleed in war'. "The most important safety measure for both personnel and forests is elaborate fire prevention work along with preparedness and continuous vigil. A combination of these three key ingredients will substantially reduce the risk posed by raging forest fires and avoid such tragic accidents," Bhargav told *Sanctuary*.

Tammangol died on the spot from asphyxiation and burns while attempting to douse the wildfire. Range Forest Officer Gangadhar and three other forest watchers from the local community were also injured in the fire and had to be shifted to a hospital. While Karnataka Chief Minister Siddaramaiah has ordered a probe into Tammangol's death, the deceased forest guard's family has been assured Rs. 25 lakh as compensation by the Bandipur Tiger Conservation Foundation. "The order has not reached my office yet, but a decision to provide the victim's family with Rs. 25 lakh as compensation has been taken," said T. Heeralal, Field Director of Bandipur National Park, to *Sanctuary*.

"Good fire prevention work includes equitable hiring of local people as fire watchers. The clearing and maintenance of fire lines, which are linear paths cut through a large block of forest to contain a forest fire, is the next step. The identification of potential 'hot spots', 24-hour vigil by expert fire spotters equipped with wireless sets from strategically-located observation posts, and communication with quick-reaction teams which can be rushed to the spot within the least-possible time are some of the important preventive measures that must be taken," he said.

Restating the importance of committed leadership and experienced personnel in carrying out these measures, Bhargav made another relevant argument, advocating the imposition of a moratorium on all financial year end civil works that distract the attention of officials and eat into precious time and other resources during every fire season. Reiterating that fighting forest fires is an extremely difficult job and requires years of learning and exposure to field situations, Bhargav said, "The department would do well to identify a core group of field officers and personnel with such experience to train newly-posted guards by sharing time-tested techniques, conducting mock drills and imparting specific skills based on past learnings."

The fire that broke out in the Kalkere Range of Bandipur National Park was brought under control after a 24-hour long operation. Bandipur has been under a two-year long dry spell, and the recent failure of the southwest monsoon has intensified the problem. Notwithstanding this, unscientific interventions like drilling 100 bore wells, announced by the government, must not be authorised in national parks as they obstruct natural ecological processes.

While some officials suspect that the fire was sparked by friction between dry bamboo flowers and sticks, the Deputy Conservator of Forests Mohan Gangolli maintains that intentional torching of the forest cannot be ruled out. Previously, there have been instances of disgruntled locals setting the dry vegetation on fire in order to settle scores with forest authorities. However, in the Bandipur wildfire case, since there has been no concrete proof of any human involvement in starting the fire, no arrests have been made so far.

Sources: [The Hindu](#), [Times Of India](#).

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