

State Forest Dept to Merge Conservation with Tourism

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DEHRADUN: Pressure on the forest department to open a reserve forest for tourism, for the sake of revenue generation and employment of local people has made forest officials think in terms of tourism and not forestry, their mainstay. Concerned about the conservation of biodiversity, the department has now come up with a proposal to strike a balance between conservation and tourism.

The department has learnt from the Nanda Devi Biosphere, where tourism was closed after an excess of it was found to have damaged its biodiversity. "A survey of the existing biodiversity situation will be made before any reserve forest is opened for tourism. After 10 years, another survey will be conducted and if the biodiversity is found to be damaged, tourism will be discontinued," said STS Lepcha, managing director, Uttarakhand Forest Development Corporation (UFDC), talking to TOI.

In the survey, the number of species of trees and plants, wild animals, birds and butterflies will be counted. The primary data is already available in the working plan of each forest division, while secondary data will further update it.

The central idea behind the proposal is to encourage participation of local people, but first by sensitizing them. "The locals will be educated not to let their animals graze or to set forest on fire, which they sometimes do for the growth of new grass for their cattle to graze. These measures will pave the way for biodiversity to grow, which will further boost tourism and benefit locals in return," said Lepcha.

Growth in vegetation will give food and cover to fauna. Abundance of food for herbivores will help their numbers increase and provide sufficient prey for carnivores, besides reducing human-animal conflict. Improved diversity will attract more tourists, which will boost livelihood of local people and the state's economy.

The forest department and UFDC have joint hands to steer eco-tourism in the state's forests of the state. A proposal regarding an action plan will be submitted before the governing board and sent to the state government for final approval for implementation, officials added.

"A panel of experts will be created to undertake developmental work under Society Act and another panel under Company Act. The segregation has been done to save taxes. Officials related to eco-tourism and NGOs under Service Act will be able to get funds from various sources and make development plans. Under the Company Act, marketing experts will be able to undertake promotional exercise, book package tours and so on," Lepcha said.

