

OFFICE OF THE COMPTROLLER AND AUDITOR GENERAL OF INDIA

NEW DELHI

8th AUGUST, 2022

AUDIT REPORT ON CONSERVATION OF COASTAL ECOSYSTEMS TABLED

Report of the Comptroller and Auditor General of India on Conservation of Coastal Ecosystems: Union Government, Ministry of Environment, Forests and Climate Change was tabled in Parliament here today. This Report contains the observations of the Performance Audit on Conservation of Coastal Ecosystems for the period 2015-20. The report also contains instances which came to notice in earlier years but could not be reported in previous Audit Reports; matters relating to the period subsequent to 2019-20 have also been included, wherever necessary.

The Government has issued notifications under Environment Protection Act 1986 to regulate the activities in coastal space so as to protect the coastal environment from various anthropogenic activities. Coastal Regulation Zone Notification (CRZ) 2019 which was superseded by its earlier versions in 1991 and 2011 implemented by MoEF&CC aims to classify the coastal area into different zones and manage the activities in an integrated manner. Pre-audit studies conducted to understand the risks in coastal zone management revealed that there were large scale CRZ violation in the coastal stretches. Incidences of illegal construction activities (reducing coastal space), effluent discharges from local bodies, industries and aquaculture farms have been recorded from various data sources.

Accordingly, we decided to take up a Performance Audit on Conservation of Coastal Ecosystems with the following objectives:

1. To examine if institutional mechanism exists at Centre as well as State to regulate the activities in CRZ areas as per the provisions of CRZ notification 2019.
2. To examine if CRZ clearances granted by the Government is as per due procedure and to conserve coastal ecology
3. Whether post clearance monitoring as well as enforcement of CRZ regulations safeguarded coastal ecosystems
4. To examine if the project development objectives under Integrated Coastal Zone Management Programme (ICZMP) were successful.
5. To evaluate the measures taken up by the Government towards achieving the targets under SDG-14.

Key Audit findings

Institutional Framework

The three institutions responsible for the implementation of the CRZ notification are: i) the National Coastal Zone Management Authority (NCZMA) at the centre ii) State/Union Territory Coastal Zone Management Authorities (SCZMAs/UTCZMAs) in every coastal state and union territory iii) District Level Committees (DLCs) in every district that has a coastal stretch and where the CRZ notification is applicable. We saw that MoEF&CC has not notified NCZMA as a permanent body and it is reconstituted every few years and in the absence of defined membership, it was functioning as an ad-hoc body. Further, the composition of NCZMA was not uniform over years.

Instances were observed where Expert Appraisal Committees (EAC) granted clearances, though domain experts were not present during the project deliberations. Also, cases were noted where the members of EAC were less than half of the total strength during the deliberations as there was no fixed quorum for EAC members.

SCZMA was not reconstituted in the state of Karnataka and there was delayed reconstitution in the states of Goa, Odisha and West Bengal. SCZMAs held meetings without fulfilling the quorum requirements and lacked representation from relevant stakeholder bodies. SCZMAs in many states did not have sufficient manpower to perform their mandate.

DLCs of Tamil Nadu lacked participation from local traditional communities. In Andhra Pradesh, DLCs were not established at all. In Goa, DLCs were formed after a delay of six years. DLCs are yet to be reconstituted in two coastal districts of Karnataka as on March 2021.

Project Clearances under CRZ Notifications

Projects were approved despite inadequacies in the EIA Reports which included non-accreditation of the consultant involved with the preparation of the EIA Report, usage of outdated baseline data, non-evaluation of environmental impacts of the project, non-addressal of disasters which the project area was prone to.

Activities forming a part of the mitigation plans like mangrove conservation/ replantation, biodiversity conservation plan, rain water harvesting plan failed to be included in the Environment Management Plan as the same was left to the project proponent (PP) to be carried out.

We observed projects where MoEF&CC relied on the information submitted by the Project Proponent with respect to potential ecological risks due to the project activities without verification.

Instances were observed where the SCZMA rather than recommending the projects to relevant authorities, granted clearance on its own. Further, SCZMAs had recommended many projects without the submission of mandatory documents.

Post Clearance Monitoring and Enforcement of CRZ Notifications

Instances were observed where the Project Proponent failed to comply with conditions mentioned in the Clearance and did not submit the mandatory half yearly compliance reports to the Regional Offices of MoEF&CC. There were cases where the projects commenced without obtaining any CTE or CTO from the concerned State Pollution Control Board.

The enforcement of CRZ provisions by SCZMAs and DLCs were reviewed and instances were observed where SCZMAs failed to take action against CRZ violations and the DLCs too failed to identify violations and report the same to SCZMAs.

Conservation of Coastal Ecosystems

Despite serious reduction and degradation of the live coral cover in the Gulf of Mannar Islands, no viable strategy to mitigate the propagation of the invasive species had been devised by the Department of Forest, Tamil Nadu. Issues such as absence of a monitoring system for coral reefs, and non-preparation of management plans for turtle nesting sites in Goa were observed. Instances where prohibited activities like infrastructure development in areas of coastal sand dunes were observed in Goa. Gaps in the efforts to conserve mangroves in Goa and Gujarat were noticed. Instances were observed where the sewage treatment plants were either altogether absent or were functioning without any monitoring leading to discharge of harmful effluents into coastal waters.

Integrated Coastal Zone Management Project

Although the entire work of mapping of Hazard Line was completed in August 2018, the ground demarcation of the Hazard Line was yet to be done by MoEF&CC. The Integrated Management Plans (IMPs) for Critically Vulnerable Coastal Areas (CVCAs) were yet to be prepared by the coastal states.

In Gujarat, there was underutilisation of the instruments procured under the project due to which the study of the physiochemical parameters of soil and water of the inertial area of the Gulf of Kutch was not conducted.

There were insufficient capacity building measures at Centre for Management of Coastal Ecosystems established by Odisha State Pollution Control Board (OSPCB) as against the targets set for the collection and analysis of samples there was a huge shortfall. Further, there was non-operation of the equipment procured for the analysis of the samples due to manpower shortage at the centre.

The objective of effective sea patrolling in Gahirmatha Sanctuary remained unachieved. A research laboratory at Dangmal, Kendrapara District, Odisha constructed in 2016 could not be made functional till date.

Sustainable Development Goals

The stakeholder map prepared for the Sustainable Development Goal-14 misses out a few significant stakeholder organisations like the Indian Coast Guard and Ministry of Ports, Shipping and Waterways. The State Indicator frameworks had not been prepared by the states of Maharashtra and Kerala. Coastal states adopted the national indicators as developed by MoSPI without adapting them to the state specific environmental aspects. Also, further localization to District levels had been done only by the State of Karnataka by notifying District Indicator Framework (DIF).

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