

CHAPTER-V

Protection of Wildlife Sanctuaries

A Snapshot

Forest personnel were trained on a rifle other than the one currently used by the Department. Check-posts/ naka were either not established or were inoperative and lacked adequate staff, rendering them ineffective for protection of wildlife and its habitats. Sanctuaries were not adequately equipped with 24X7 communication devices. Due to these lacunae in the protection function, illegal cutting of trees was prevalent in the Sanctuaries.

Introduction

Wildlife Protection means such activities that are directly related to protection and include establishment and maintenance of anti-poaching camps, check-posts, boundary protection structures, patrolling, intelligence etc. Protection plays a very important role in wildlife conservation.

National Wildlife Action Plan (2002-16) emphasized the importance of arming forest staff with sophisticated weapons and other equipment including better and faster communication facilities to enable them to combat poaching and control illicit cutting of trees effectively.

In order to ascertain the status of preparedness of the Department for protection of wildlife habitats, Audit analysed various aspects of safety and security in respect of the six test-checked Sanctuaries. Audit observations are discussed in the succeeding paragraphs.

5.1 Availability of frontline staff

The forest area is divided into Beats, Rounds, Ranges and Divisions for better management. The officials in charge of the Beat (Beat Guard) and Round (Forester) are the frontline staff responsible for conservation and protection of forests. The sanctioned strength *vis-a-vis* persons in position of frontline staff as of 31 March 2021 were as under:

Table 5.1: Sanctioned strength *vis-a-vis* person in position of frontline staff as of 31 March 2021

Sanctuary	Sanctioned Strength	Person in position	Vacancy	Percentage of vacancy	Period of vacancy
Balaram Ambaji	64	50	14	21.88	Between December 2018 and March 2021
Jessore	18	13	5	27.78	Between April 2020 and March 2021

Sanctuary	Sanctioned Strength	Person in position	Vacancy	Percentage of vacancy	Period of vacancy
Jambughoda	32	23	9	28.13	Between June 2016 and January 2021
Ratanmahal	18	11	7	38.89	
Shoolpaneshwar	98	57	41	41.84	Between January 2016 and February 2021
Purna	44	30	14	31.82	Not furnished

Source: Information furnished by the respective jurisdictional Divisions.

As can be seen from above, the vacancy in frontline cadre in the six test-checked Sanctuaries ranged between 22 to 42 *per cent* (between January 2016 and March 2021).

The vacancy in frontline staff, among other things, affected the protection function which was evident from illegal cutting of trees, cultivation in the Sanctuary area and non-operational check posts/ insufficient posting of manpower at check post/ *naka* as discussed in paragraphs 3.5.1.1; 5.3 and 5.5 of this report. Thus, the Department was required to fill the vacancies in the critical cadre of forest personnel for better protection and management of wildlife and its habitat.

5.2 Availability and status of arms

As per Gujarat Forest Statistics (2020-21), there were 110 cases of assaults on forest officials during 2016-21. Further, there were 18,469 cases of illicit cutting of trees (2016-21). Equipping eligible forest personnel with adequate and operational firearms would act as a deterrent against such incidents of assaults and illegal cutting of trees, poaching etc. The F&ED decided (August 2007) that the forest officials from forest guard and above shall be eligible for getting the firearms for implementation of various statutes *viz.* IFA, 1927; WPA, 1972 and FCA 1980.

The availability and working condition of the firearms in the test-checked Sanctuaries is depicted below.

Table 5.2: Availability and status of firearms in the test-checked Sanctuaries as on 31 March 2021

Name of the Sanctuary	Persons in Position (forest guard & above)	Working firearms available (in Nos.)	Percentage of working firearms to eligible staff
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)= (3)/(2) x 100
Balaram Ambaji	50	20	40.0
Jessore	13	10	76.9
Jambughoda	23	16	69.6
Ratanmahal	11	6	54.6
Shoolpaneshwar	57	38	66.7
Purna	25	12	48.0

Source: Information furnished by the jurisdictional divisions.

From the above, it can be seen that there was wide disparity in terms of per head availability of firearms among the test-checked Sanctuaries which ranged from 40 to 77 per cent.

5.2.1 Personnel being trained on different rifle than the one in current use

In order to ensure protection of wildlife, fire practices and training of the security personnel is essential.

The arms training for the personnel of the Department was being conducted in Gujarat Police Academy at Karai, Gandhinagar and at State Reserve Police Training Centre, Sorath, Junagadh. Audit observed (October 2021) that the forest personnel were trained on 0.22 rifle though the rifles being used by them were 0.12 bore rifles. The specifications (range, weight and types of bullets used) of the rifle on which the forest personnel are trained and the rifles used by the Department vary from each other. This may affect the operational effectiveness of the personnel during real life situations.

5.3 Patrolling and Check-posts

Patrolling is integral to ensure protection and conservation of wildlife. Regular patrolling and establishment of check-post (*naka*) at strategic points function as a deterrent against poaching, illicit tree cutting and other illegal activities in the protected areas. Further, availability of vehicles in working condition is essential for the purpose of patrolling and rescue of wildlife.

5.3.1 Availability of Vehicles

The Department provides vehicles *viz.* four wheeler/ two wheeler etc. to the field offices based on the sensitivity of locations/ duties performed. The details related to vehicles available and their status in the six test-checked Sanctuaries as on 30 September 2022 are as tabulated below.

Table 5.3: Number and status of vehicles available in the Sanctuaries as on 30 September 2022

Sanctuary	Area of Sanctuary (in Sq. Km.)	Number of Jeeps/pickup van			Number of two-wheelers			Coverage of Sanctuary area (sq. km. per four wheeler)	Coverage of Sanctuary area (sq. km. per two wheeler)
		Total	Working	Not Working	Total	Working	Not Working		
Jessore	180.66	3	2	1	9	9	0	90.33	20.07
Balaram Ambaji	544.78	10	10	0	26	26	0	54.45	20.95
Ratanmahal	55.65	4	2	2	9	9	0	27.83	6.18
Jambughoda	130.38	4	2	2	19	19	0	65.19	6.86
Shoolpaneshwar	607.70	4	1	3	16	16	0	607.70	37.98
Purna	160.84	10	9	1	28	26	2	17.87	6.19

Source: Information provided by the respective Division.

From the above table, it is evident that coverage of jeeps/ pickup vans in the Sanctuary had wide disparity amongst various Sanctuaries and it ranged between 17.87 sq. km. per vehicle for Purna Sanctuary to 607.70 sq. km. per vehicle for Shoolpaneshwar Sanctuary.

5.3.2 Check-posts

Check-post (*naka*) at strategic points function as a deterrent against poaching, illicit tree cutting and other illegal activities in the protected areas. The details of roads passing through the six test-checked sanctuaries and number of check posts are given in the table below:

Table 5.4: Details of roads passing through the six test-checked sanctuaries and the Check-posts established in the test-checked Sanctuaries as on September 2022

Name of the Sanctuary	No. of roads passing through the Sanctuary	Number of Check posts envisaged in the Management Plans	Total Check-posts established	Operative Check-posts	Number of <i>naka</i> guards employed to operate the Check-posts
Balaram-Ambaji	15	8	2	2	4
Jessore	7	10			
Jambughoda	7	3	5	1	Not Furnished
Ratanmahal	4	Not provided in Management Plan	3	3	Not Furnished
Shoolpaneshwar	46	10	4	2	1
Purna	Not Furnished	12	7	7	12
Total	79	43	21	15	17

Source: Information provided by the jurisdictional Division.

From the above table, it can be seen that for the five test-checked Sanctuaries (excluding Ratanmahal) as against the 43 check posts proposed in the Management Plan, only 18 were established, out of which only 12 were operational. In the case of Ratanmahal Sanctuary, though the Department stated (November 2022) that all the three Check-posts were operational, no data regarding forest personnel posted in these Check-posts was furnished.

Observations noticed during joint field visit with the concerned RFOs (July 2021 to September 2021) have been discussed in Paragraph 5.5 and the following sub-paragraphs:

5.3.2.1 Balaram Ambaji and Jessore: Deesa and Palanpur



Photograph 5.1: Naka on Deesa-Palanpur Highway
Photograph taken by Audit on 21 July 2021

Audit observed (July 2021) that one *naka* was situated at Deesa on the Deesa-Palanpur Highway and the other on the outskirts of Palanpur. Both the *nakas* were far away from the boundaries of the Sanctuaries and were established only for the purpose of providing forest pass to the vehicles carrying timber/ wood. Since these *nakas* were looked after by a single person at any time of the day, it made stopping and checking of vehicles

difficult. Audit noticed that the vehicles were stopping on their own to collect the required pass. This reduces the utility of the *naka* for curbing illegal removal of timber/ wood from the Sanctuaries.

Banaskantha Forest Division replied (September 2021) that there was a proposal to shift the Deesa *Naka* at a suitable place.

5.3.2.2 Jambughoda Sanctuary

During joint site visit with the jurisdictional RFO, Audit observed (July 2021) that though at the entry point near Lonkadi, Shivrajpur Range, a *naka* was constructed, however no forest official was posted to check the activity on road leading to the Sanctuary. Further, on the other side of the Sanctuary (Kohivav forest area) touching revenue areas and rural road, no *naka* was established. Thus, there was no check on the activities in this part of the Sanctuary. Audit noticed illegal cutting of trees (July 2021) along the *kachcha* road leading to Kohivav watch tower as mentioned in Paragraph 5.5.

5.3.2.3 Shoolpaneshwar Sanctuary

During joint site visit with concerned RFOs, Audit observed (September 2021) that out of the two operational Check-posts, no forest personnel¹ were posted at Thavadia Check-post of Gora range. Further at Kakoti Forest *Chowki* in Sagai Range near Maharashtra State Border, no regular beat guard² was posted. Thus, the effectiveness of the Check-posts for protection was compromised. This was evident from the instances of illegal cutting of trees as discussed in Paragraph 5.5.

¹ The Check-post was being operated by the *mandali* solely for collecting fees for entry of vehicles from the visitors.

² The beat guard posted was having three charges as against the usual charge of a single beat (smallest administrative unit of the forest area).

5.3.2.4 Purna Sanctuary

During joint site visit with the RFO, Audit observed (September 2021) that the *naka* enroute Mahal Eco tourism site (inside the Sanctuary) was being operated by eco-tourism society (*mandali*) for collecting fees from the visitors only. Audit observed that though the Department considered this check-post as existing and operational in the Management Plan (2014-2024) of the Sanctuary for the purpose of protection and conservation activities in the Sanctuary area, however, neither any forest personnel were posted there nor any record of Beat Guard's visit was available at the *naka*. Moreover, the barrier of the *naka* was located on the road leading to the eco-tourism site instead of main road leading to the Sanctuary area. This reduced the utility of the *naka* for curbing illegal removal of timber/ wood from the Sanctuaries or regulating tourist movement in the Sanctuary area.

Thus, among other things the check-posts/ *naka* were found to be deficit in staff. In view of the number of roads passing through the Sanctuaries *vis-à-vis* the number and condition of the existing check-posts, the Department needs to establish check posts at the strategic locations.

Recommendation 11: The Department may ensure that check post/ *naka* are established at strategic locations, properly maintained, and provided with adequate staff to ensure their effectiveness.

5.4 Communication devices

Better and faster communication facilities help the forest personnel in protection of wildlife and control of illicit cutting of trees. Details of availability and status of wireless equipment/ other surveillance items in the test-checked Sanctuaries are given in the table below:

Table 5.5: Availability and status of wireless and Walkie-Talkie as on 30 September 2021

Name of the Sanctuary	Wireless		Walkie-Talkie	
	Total No.	Working condition	Total No.	Working condition
Balaram Ambaji	13	13	91	54
Jessore	9	9	35	27
Jambughoda	2	0	10	Not furnished
Ratanmahal	2	Not furnished	13	Not furnished
Shoolpaneshwar	18	15	99	93
Purna	16	16	31	31

Source: Information furnished by the respective Division offices.

From the above, it is evident that in Balaram Ambaji, Jessore and Shoolpaneshwar Sanctuaries, 59 per cent, 77 per cent, and 94 per cent walkie-talkie were operational.

During joint site visit of Jambughoda Sanctuary (July/ August 2021), Audit observed that in the inner part³ of the Sanctuary, neither coverage of mobile network nor wireless facility, was available. Further, the vehicles used by the

³ Kathkuan forest area, Ghagal Mata forest area.

forest personnel in Jambughoda and Ratanmahal Sanctuaries did not have the facility of wireless communication. Moreover, the wireless station and wireless equipment at Jambughoda Range office were not in working condition (July 2021). Incidentally, illegal cutting of trees was also noticed in this area of the Sanctuary as discussed in the Paragraph 5.5.

Similarly, during joint site visit (September 2021) of Shoolpaneshwar Sanctuary, Audit noticed that there was no mobile connectivity near Zarwani Eco tourism site. Also, the wireless station at Zarwani Eco Tourism site was devoid of a battery back-up and therefore, the wireless system was not working during interruption in electricity supply. No walkie-talkie was available at Zarwani Round as the same had not been received back from repairs (sent approximately a year ago).

Lack of seamless communication between officials and personnel posted in frontline duty for reporting any happening/ incident or call back-up force was detrimental for preservation and conservation activities.

During the exit conference (October 2022), the Department assured that steps would be taken for ensuring connectivity at all times. Further the Department in their reply (November 2022) stated that wireless and walkie-talkie sets of Jambughoda and Ratanmahal Sanctuaries had been sent for necessary repairs.

Recommendation 12: The Department may consider equipping the field staff state-of-the-art communication and surveillance devices to effectively control activities detrimental to wildlife habitats.

5.5 Illegal cutting of trees

Deficiencies in operation of *naka* and management of wireless communication devices led to lacunae in the monitoring of activities inside the Sanctuary. During joint site visit with the forest officials, instances of illegal tree cutting were noticed. Audit observed stumps of the cut trees, axe marks on tree trunk and stumps burnt to hide illicit cutting of trees inside Jambughoda Sanctuary.

Similarly, Audit observed numerous instances of tree cutting over a period of time⁴ in Fulsar, Sagai and Gora Range of the Shoolpaneshwar as both freshly cut and timeworn tree stumps were observed. In Purna Sanctuary also, Audit noticed instances of illegal cutting of trees.

⁴ As both fresh as well as old tree stumps were observed, indicating that illegal tree cutting was prevalent in the Sanctuary.



Photograph 5.2: Freshly cut tree stump, Fulsar Range, Shoolpaneshwar (Photograph taken during joint site visit on 8 September 2021)



Photograph 5.3: Illegal cutting of trees in Purna. (Photograph taken during joint site visit on 22 September 2021)

The ACF (in-charge) and Range Forest Officer, Jambughoda stated (July 2021) that round the clock patrolling was not possible because of shortage of frontline staff and the trees had been cut over a period of time.

Thus, illegal cutting of trees was prevalent in the Sanctuaries which indicated the need to further strengthen working of Check-post/ *naka* and providing sufficient trained human resources equipped with necessary arms, vehicles and functional communication equipments.