

Was Bandipur forest fire a call for attention?

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Was bandipur forest fire a call for attention?

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INDIA – Forest officials in the Bandipur Tiger Reserve in Karnataka are sure that the fire that started last Friday evening was a man-made disaster. Speaking to DNA, Dr Shantanu Kalambi, a veterinary doctor with the Wildlife Trust of India, who is currently at the site, said that while people suspect local tribes for starting the fire, there is no concrete proof of it, and no arrests have been made so far.

The high-intensity fire has destroyed more than 1,000 hectares of forest in Bandipur Tiger Reserve. The fire that ravaged Moleyuru, Kalkere and Hediya forest ranges in the north-western parts of the reserve had threatened to spread to Wayanad Wildlife Sanctuary in Kerala. But timely intervention by officials from both states had averted major ecological disaster, as reported by a website.

While the source of the fire hasn't been determined, officials have said that it started five kilometres inside the forest area. This area is a restricted zone and can't be accessed by tourists, said Dr Kalambi, who has also shared a video of the situation on Saturday.

The veterinarian added that while most of the large animals had escaped, witnesses found 14 dead langurs. The monkeys usually climb trees to escape when fire breaks out, but in the process may have suffocated from the fumes, he said.

The 87,400-hectre Bandipur Tiger Reserve and 32,000-hectre Wayanad Wildlife Sancturay, along with Nagarhole National Park (64,300 hectares) and Mudumalai National Park (32,000 hectares), form the Nilagiri Biosphere Reserve, one of the most ecologically sensitive regions in India. It is the largest habitat of wild elephants in South Asia. The fire so far has destroyed a large chunk of forest area, but forest officials are still unable to estimate the exact area, although some suggest it could be more than 40 square kilometres.

In 2009, 2012 and 2014, low intensity fires had hit the Bandipur Tiger Reserve, but Friday's blaze was the first in which a forest guard was killed. Three others were injured in the incident.

Murigeppa Thammagol succumbed to burn injuries on Saturday, while forest range officer Gangadhar and two forest guards, Manu and Manju, who belong to the local tribal community, are being treated in a private hospital in Mysore.

A report titled Forest Fire Disaster Management, prepared by the National Institute of Disaster Management in 2012, noted two major reasons for forest fires in Karnataka – conflicts over the collection of forest products, and the rivalry between local communities and the forest department.

Kedar Gore, the director of the Corbett Foundation said that forest fires in India are usually man-made, but added that there is need for more dialogue between forest officials and tribal communities. “Most tribal communities living within the forest are entitled to live there because it is their land, as much as it is the animals’. They have the right to cultivate the land for farming as well,” he added.

Gore said that there are instances where a tiger may take away cattle or an elephant may trample on cultivated land. “During these times, it is important for the forest department to compensate the tribal communities because if they don’t, someone may deliberately light a fire to cause harm to wildlife without realising the ramifications,” he said.

Kedar said that ideally to prevent a forest fire from spreading, one needs to have fire lines. “Fire lines are a linear patch of land that is cleared out of vegetation and grass, so that fires don’t spread. During this period the beginning of summer we tend to have dry leaves that can result in forest fires, which are caused deliberately or by carelessness,” he added.
