

Keep eco-sensitive zone of 1 km around forests: Supreme Court

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The Supreme Court directed that every protected forest, national park, and wildlife sanctuary across the country should have a mandatory eco-sensitive zone (ESZ) of a minimum of one km starting from their demarcated boundaries.



[Ref-Live Mint]

Highlights of the Judgement

- The government should not confine its role to that of a **“facilitator” of economic activities** for the **“immediate upliftment of the fortunes of the State”**.
- The State has to **act as a trustee for the benefit of the general public** in relation to the **natural resources** so that sustainable development could be achieved in the long term.
- **Mining** within the national parks and wildlife sanctuaries **shall not be permitted**.
- **The Principal Chief Conservator of Forests (PCCF) and Home Secretaries** of States are responsible for compliance with the judgment.
 - The Court entrusted the PCCF to ensure that **no new permanent structure** comes up **within ESZ** and those already carrying out any activity will have to apply for permission afresh from the **PCCF within six months**.
- The present order would apply in all such states/UTs where the **minimum ESZ is not prescribed**.
 - However, if the **ESZ is already prescribed** as per law that goes beyond the one-kilometer buffer zone, the **wider margin as ESZ shall prevail**.
- The minimum width of **ESZ may be diluted** in the **overwhelming public interest**.
 - In the above case, the state or UT concerned shall approach the Court-appointed Central Empowered Committee (CEC) and MoEFCC, and both these bodies shall give their respective opinions or recommendations and based on which this Court shall pass the appropriate order.

Eco-sensitive zone

- They are areas **around Protected Areas, National Parks, and Wildlife Sanctuaries**.
- The purpose of declaring ESZs is to create some kind of "**shock absorbers**" to the protected areas by **regulating and managing the activities** around such areas.
- They also act as a **transition zone** from areas of high protection to areas involving lesser protection.
- They are notified by the **Ministry of Environment, Forests, and Climate Change (MoEFCC)**.

Activities prohibited in ESZ

- Activities such as **commercial mining, setting of sawmills and industries causing pollution, commercial use of firewood, and major hydropower projects**, are prohibited.
- **Tourism activities** like flying over protected areas in an aircraft or hot air balloon and discharge of effluents and **solid waste** in natural water bodies or terrestrial areas are also prohibited.