

Bid to check conflict in Sunderbans

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Kolkata: The forest department is planning new rules in the Sunderbans, that according to them, would check man-tiger conflict.

The department, in a recent proposal, said that it's planning to discourage use of clay ovens by villagers during fishing trips. They have made it clear that the idea is to stop the fishermen from getting off their boats and collect firewood from inside the forest. The fishermen often need to stay back in the forests, where fishing is allowed, for three to five days for a good catch.

"Most of the tiger attacks happen when the fishermen get off the boats and venture inside the forest to collect firewood. If they use stoves or LPG cylinders instead of clay ovens, they won't be needing firewood. Though, they will be allowed to carry axes with them for self-defence," said Sunderbans Tiger Reserve (STR) field director Soumitra Dasgupta. But, Sunderbans Janashramajibi Man-



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cha secretary Pabitra Mondal termed the proposal 'impractical'. "Most of the fishermen have never seen gas ovens or LPG cylinders. So, using them is a distant dream. Moreover, they can't afford expensive LPG cooking system." However, Dasgupta made it clear that the department is planning to tie up

with an NGO that will provide the villagers these cylinders.

Mondal, meanwhile, claimed that the rule has already come into effect in certain pockets of the mangroves and the department has started imposing fines if there's any violation.

"The violation of the rule incurs a fine of Rs 500 in the first offence. The fine is Rs 1,000 for the second offence and Rs 2500 for the third offence. Already, a number of fishermen and crab catchers were fined Rs 500 for carrying 'prohibited' items like clay ovens inside the forest. Worse, the fishermen draw water from tubewells at the forest check posts. Now, the foresters have threatened us that we won't be allowed to do so any further if we break the rules," alleged Bonobibi Tarafdar, a crab catcher.

Several agitation programmes have been held at Gosaba, Pakhirala, Kumirmari, Basonti, Choto Mollakhali, Samsernagar, Satjelia, Kultoli on Monday and Tuesday. "We have already requested the for-

esters to revoke the order," said Mondal.

Though the foresters have clearly said that the fishermen would be allowed to carry axes for self defence, Mondal alleged that they have been fined on a few occasions for carrying the item inside the mangroves.

Chief wildlife warden Ujjwal Bhattacharya said that issuing boat licence should not mean that the fishermen will be allowed to go inside the forest to collect wood. "Our idea is to discourage the fishermen from getting off their boats and venturing inside the mangroves to collect firewood," he added.

In 2013, six persons were killed in tiger attack when they went inside the forest to catch crabs. In 2014, so far, nine persons were killed. Unofficially, the number is much more. Foresters said that this also makes the tigers vulnerable to attacks by villagers.

The forest department used to collect Rs 12 per fisherman per trip against firewood collections. It has now stopped charging the levy.