

Centre clears forest road expansion

North Bengal To Lose Seven Hectares Of Forest For NH-31A Widening

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Kolkata: Scrapping the recommendations made by the ministry of environment and forests (MoEF) during the UPA-II regime, the Narendra Modi government on Wednesday cleared a road expansion project in North Bengal that will result in diversion of more than 7 hectares of land in a key wildlife habitat in the region.

A ministry official, who didn't want to be quoted, said that the proposal to widen National Highway 31A, that cuts across Mahananda Wildlife Sanctuary, by Border Roads Task Force (BRTF) had been cleared with certain conditions. "The standing committee of the National Board for Wildlife (NBWL)

has cleared the proposal in its 31st meeting. But, they have suggested construction of bridges to facilitate animal movement in the area keeping in mind that animals frequent a riverbed area here to have water," the official said.

The widening of the highway from Sevoke to Gangtok will see diversion of 7.68 hectares forestland in the Mahananda sanctuary.

There is forest cover on either side of this stretch from Seven Mile to Sevoke. Beyond that, there are forested areas up to Kalikhola river. Apart from elephants, that use this corridor for movement between Teesta's west and east banks, sporadic tiger sighting is also reported from this area.

"In 2000, a tiger had



Wildlife experts believe elephant corridor will shrink further if the national highway is expanded from Sevoke to Gangtok

moved out of Mahananda Wildlife Sanctuary near this area to an army camp. This area has immense importance as far as wildlife is concerned. If more than 7 hectares of forestland are sacrificed for this project, the corridor for animals' move-

ment will shrink drastically, triggering more man-animal conflict in the days ahead," said state wildlife advisory board member Animesh Bose. The place also houses the rare snow orchid that's endemic to this area only.

The project first came up

before the forest department for clearance in 2009.

"This road is a matter of national importance. But we also need to keep in mind that the area is a protected area. Widening of the highway will leave the animals, mainly the elephants, with less space. We had given our views to the Centre on this a couple of years ago," said state's chief wildlife warden Ujjwal Bhattacharya.

In September 2013, a sub-committee under the MoEF had suggested that roads like this one should be maintained in their current width and form. It had suggested that road projects must investigate and demonstrate that they have considered other alternative routes that avoid natural areas of high ecological value.