

# EXPLAINING MOEFCC'S U-TURN TO MERGE AUTONOMOUS BODIES

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According to internal documents, the National Tiger Conservation Authority had opposed the proposed merger. Representative image. | Photo Credit: M.A. Sriram/The Hindu

In June, the Ministry of Environment, Forests and Climate Change (MoEFCC) [issued a notification](#) quietly walking back on its move to establish integrated regional offices by merging offices of the Forest Survey of India (FSI), the National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA), the Wildlife Crime Control Bureau (WCCB), and the Central Zoo Authority (CZA), and thus bring them under the Ministry.

The idea for such reorganisation was announced during the COVID-19 lockdown and came under criticism from activists that it would render key environmental organisations ["toothless"](#). For example, in the existing structure, the NTCA can oppose a forest clearance for an infrastructure project for diverting Tiger Reserve areas. The proposed merger would have rendered this difficult as the NTCA would have come under the Deputy Director General of Forests, who is in charge of the Integrated Regional Office and reports to the Ministry.

According to internal documents, accessed by an application filed under the Right to Information Act by Karnataka-based activist Ramprasad, the MoEFCC justified the merger for "ease of doing business" whereas the NTCA had opposed it, saying it could lead to "administrative confusion, chaos ... loss of independence, undue interference in decision making, [and] loss of focus in discharging duties and responsibilities."

Giridhar Kulkarni, a Belgaum-based wildlife conservationist, had filed a petition against this reorganisation plan in the Karnataka High Court in 2020, arguing that it would amount to a merger of entities and authorities that is impermissible in law. The MoEFCC replied that the notification does not amount to a merger and that the intention was to get the various authorities to function at 19 regional offices, under one roof.

Following this assurance, the Karnataka High Court disposed of the petition but gave the petitioner the liberty to approach the Court if the merger was found to adversely affect the functioning of the various bodies.

But more than two years later, the MoEFCC dropped the merger plan, likely owing to technical and administrative difficulties in merging the institutions in question.

“It was an idea that was designed to fail,” Ritwick Dutta, an environmental lawyer and cofounder at the Legal Initiative for Forest and Environment (LIFE), told this writer. “The notification is an acknowledgement that the decision to merge the different statutory, scientific, and administrative bodies was done without much thought.”

The NTCA is the managing authority of Project Tiger and India’s Tiger Reserves. The FSI is a scientific body that primarily deals with forest data. The WCCB is an enforcement authority. And the CZA’s purview is limited to the functioning of zoos.

The same notification also proposes to reorganise existing regional offices, and this idea too has come under criticism because it does not appear to be based on any objective criteria. For example, the Bengaluru regional office would have had jurisdiction over three states and a Union Territory with different geographic and ecological characteristics: Karnataka, Kerala, Goa, and Lakshadweep.

Last month, the Indian government announced a plan to merge Project Tiger and Project Elephant. Mr. Kulkarni had expressed concerns on this occasion as well, noting that it risked undermining the autonomy of the NTCA. Mr. Dutta, on the other hand, was concerned about implications for Project Elephant given that it does not have any legal backing at present.

Tiger Reserves are recognised under the Wildlife Protection Act 1972 but Elephant Reserves are not. “Project Elephant is not taken seriously today. This plan will undermine its importance,” Mr. Dutta said. News reports have also shown how the decision to merge the two projects was taken without discussion in the wildlife division of the MoEFCC.

Broadly, experts articulated a need for disintegrated and dedicated efforts across the board, including to strengthen environmental monitoring functions.

In recent years, the role and functions of regional offices of the ministry have been widened both to process environmental approvals and monitor compliance of legally mandated safeguards during project construction, operation, and closures. As a result, such widened roles require additional funding and infrastructural support, but it remains unclear if such support has been provided.

“Decentralised infrastructure is essential as it increases accessibility to regulators and can potentially enhance legal enforcement,” said Kanchi Kohli, an environmental law and policy researcher. She suggested an internal mechanism to review whether the offices are able to prioritise their actions in such a way that they don’t disproportionately favour any regulatory outcomes, while upholding environmental protection without compromising social justice.

*Rishika Pardikar is a freelance environment reporter based in Bengaluru.*

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