



Report of the Committee

To

Formulate Objective Parameters for
Identification of Inviolable Forest Areas

Ministry of Environment and Forests,
Government of India

July 2012

1. Introduction

1.1. The Group of Ministers (GoM) constituted by the Cabinet Secretariat vide their O.M. No. 121/4/3/2010-Cab. dated 03.02.2011 to consider the environmental and developmental issues relating to coal mining and other development projects, in its fifth meeting held under the Chairmanship of the Hon'ble Finance Minister on 20th September 2011 *inter-alia* suggested that identified pristine forest areas where any mining activity would lead to irreversible damage to the forests should be barred from any kind of non-forest activity. The GoM further suggested that all such forests which can never be regenerated to the desired quality should be protected. The GoM therefore suggested that a committee comprising experts in the field can be constituted to identify such forests.

1.2. The Ministry of Environment and Forests (MoEF) after examination of the matter observed that for identification of such forest areas throughout India in an objective and unbiased manner, it will need to constitute two Committees. The first committee to formulate objective parameters for identification of such inviolate forest areas for any mining and related activities and after approval, the second committee to actually identify and prepare geo-referenced maps of the areas that meet the identified parameters in each State/ Union Territory.

1.3. The MoEF vide order dated 30.03.2012 therefore, constituted a committee under the Chairmanship of Secretary, Environment and Forests to formulate parameters for identification of pristine forest areas where any non-forestry activity would lead to irreversible damage, and such other forest areas which need to be conserved and protected to meet the larger objective of the long term conservation of forests and wildlife resources in the country. Apart from representatives of various institutes/organization such as National Bio-diversity Authority, Forest Survey of India, Wildlife Institute of India and National Tiger Conservation Authority, Principal Chief Conservators of Forest of Meghalaya, Tamilnadu, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Uttarakhand, Odisha and Rajasthan are also included as members of the committee. A copy of the MoEF's said order dated 30.03.2012 is enclosed as **Annexure-I**.

2. Broad Principles for Identification of Inviolate Areas

The inviolate areas are sites of significance for conservation of biodiversity (floral and faunal) and forest types that are unique and ecologically important. Besides these, the forested areas having high density coverage that are important for rendering invaluable ecological services, also need protection and conservation for sustainability of these

services through the generations. To identify and prioritize such sites/areas, global standard criteria and thresholds through effective, justifiable and transparent process using the best available scientific data/information to map such areas. Keeping this in mind, the Committee has identified following measurable parameters for identification of inviolate areas.

A. Forest Type:

Our country is endowed with a wide range of edaphic, climatic and physiographic conditions. This has resulted in a vast diversity of flora and fauna bringing the country within the mega diversity regions of the world. Of the 178 forest types identified in the country's forests as per 'Champion and Seth' classification (1968), many of them are unique (and therefore irreplaceable) to a particular site while some of these forest types, such as Tropical Wet Evergreen forests, are ecologically sensitive as they harbor a wide range of species diversity. Likewise, there are several forest types (e.g. Myristica swamp forest, reed breaks, desert dunes scrub etc.) which are either very small in extent and are found in one or few localities in the entire country and are hence irreplaceable. Based on the principles of their comparative ecological significance, extent and range, uniqueness etc. an attempt has been made to score these types on a scale of 1-100.

B. Biological Richness:

Biodiversity offers enormous economic and environmental values that are critical for human well-being. It is, however, imperiled by threats of habitat loss, degraded/impaired ecological processes, habitat fragmentation and climate change. Safeguarding significant/inviolate areas forms the backbone of biodiversity conservation. Sites of high irreplaceability and high vulnerability have the highest conservation urgency. Indian Institute of Remote Sensing have carried out biodiversity characterization for the country as a whole at landscape levels. Prioritization of the area based on the IIRS data on biodiversity, may be useful for scoring a site on the basis of this parameter.

C. Wildlife Value:

The country has a network of protected areas (PAN) in its forests. Although, global average for PAN coverage is 12%, India has only 4.9% of its geographical area under PAN comprising notified sanctuaries and national parks. These areas enjoy legal protection under Wild Life (Protection) Act, 1972 and specific provisions thereto, prohibit diversion of these areas for activities which are ecologically incompatible and may adversely affect their integrity. These PAs should therefore, be treated as inviolate. However, besides the