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Jambughoda forest to offer a slice of Gir sans lions SAJID SHAIKH

VADODARA: The Jambughoda forest sanctuary is to offer a slice of Gir. The forest department is planning to turn a small part of the Jambughoda sanctuary into a tourist zone as part of its five-year forest management plan. The tourist zone will have a Gir-like interpretation zone for easy sighting of wild animals in their natural environs. Guided tours for tourists will be carried out in the interpretation zone that will cover an area of 50 hectares.

The forest department also proposes to establish a tourist complex for the interpretation of wildlife, education and recreation. The complex will come up at Dhanpuri near Kada reservoir and Targol area in the forest. Watch towers will be constructed at strategic sites to facilitate visitors to watch wildlife, birds and other moving creatures and the scenic beauty of the forest. Besides, a 5-km nature trail connecting the watch towers with the main track would also be prepared at strategic routes of the tourism zone to take visitors for trekking. Budgetary provisions of Rs 28.30 lakh has been proposed for these activities.

"We call this eco-tourism, which in this context, can be regarded as a means to promote interest and awareness in wildlife conservation. However the promotion of tourism will be given complete attention only when the sanctuary gets developed to the extent that wildlife is seen in plentiful," deputy conservator of forest (wildlife division) S K Mehta told Times News Network.

He said the tourism zone will have sub zones like low intensity use area, development areas and development sites to guide and control its recreational use. "Nature education camp sites would be developed in appropriate locations close to water sources in the forest. Tents will be provided to visitors and nature lovers for camping. Trained guides will also be provided for proper understanding of forest life," Mehta said.

He said the interpretation centre will furnish information on vegetation and wildlife in the forest to tourists. "Further facilities of wildlife films and slide shows will also be provided," Mehta said. The Jambughoda forest boasts of a very rich biodiversity. It has 105 species of plants belonging to 88 genera and 42 families. The floral diversity is considerably high. The forest also has a host of medicinal plants.

The mammals found in the Jambughoda sanctuary include panther, sloth bear, hyena, jackal, jungle cat, rhesus macaque, common langur, common mongoose, porcupine and the Indian hare. Herbivores like cheetal and sambhar were present earlier. Wild boar, once in abundance, now have a depleted status. Besides the mammals and avifauna, the sanctuary exhibits abundant other fauna like reptiles - poisonous and non-poisonous snakes, monitor lizards and chameleons, several fish species and many insects -- cicadas, butterflies and dragonflies. Among the snakes, python, cobra, common krait, russel and saw scale viper, wolf snake, checkered keel back etc., are present.

As per the 1996-97 census there are 34 panthers, 22 hyenas, 29 blue bulls, 18 four-horned antelopes and 31 mongooses in the sanctuary. Sloth bear has been occasionally reported to be seen in the forest, Mehta said. Mehta has also drafted the management plan for Jambughoda forest sanctuary. According to the plan, the sanctuary area has been divided into core zone (2,321.40 hectare), intensive management zone (10,666.70 hectare) and tourism zone (50 hectare).

While habitat amelioration and wildlife protection works shall be carried out in the core zone, in the intensive management zone, provisions would be made for developing wildlife and forest resources.

EMAIL DATED JULY 13

1. Devotion, duty cross paths in wildlife sanctuary
MILIND GHATWAI

ZHAND (JAMBUGHODA SANCTUARY), JUNE 22:

The road to this ancient Hanuman temple, located inside a wildlife sanctuary, is paved with hurdles. For devotees it's a test of endurance that, once cleared, endears them to dada. For forest officials it's a test of patience. The conflicting interests have set devotees against forest officials over the former's move to renovate the temple, and their desire to have a pucca road, "at any cost." Carved out of stone, the 18-foot idol does not even have a canopy. In defiance of directives from the authorities, devotees have already constructed steps on either sides of the deity. "We want to renovate the temple irrespective of permission from the forest Department," says Naranbhai Patel, who has undertaken the renovation work for the last one year. Foresters had chased away labourers when a contractor, on his own, set about renovating the temple. "We know it's a forest land but we will go ahead and renovate the temple," adds another villager. Thousands pour into these inaccessible terrains on the occasion of "Hanuman Jayanti" and the last Saturday of Shravan. Many of them camp by the shrine overnight for they don't hazard a trek back home in the dark, especially those who cover the distance on foot. There are many who believe if they cover the distance on foot from their village, even if it is 50 kms away, the deity will grant their wish fast.

According to a legend, the Pandavas during their exile stayed here incognito. A perennial source of water, locals believe, came about when Arjun shot an arrow into the ground when Draupadi asked for water. A few metres away from the deity, hundreds of piles of small stones greet visitors; each stone stands for one storey of a house the devotee wishes to build, seeking dada's blessings.

The very popularity of the shrine has forced the forest officials to tackle the situation carefully. If the forest department were to go strictly by the law they would have to restrict entry into the sanctuary, cause enough for tempers to run high. "It's a religious matter, we respect their feelings. We will not come in their way if the renovation goes on in the existing place with proper permission," says a top forest officers. The villagers will have to take a permission from the Union government for any expansion or laying any road on the forest land.

"Though there is no road the area witnesses so much activity, what will happen if a pucca road is constructed," the official wonders. Interestingly, Patel claims that devotees have reached an understanding with top forest officials about the renovation. "They have told us to go ahead with the unauthorised construction for which they will never give permission," Patel says accusing lower rung forest officials for creating problems.

"We are not going to cut trees or cause any damage to environment. Why should not we be allowed to go ahead with construction," asks secretary of Shree Zhand Hanuman Trust Dashrathbhai Rathwa. "If they won't give us permission we will go to any length," warns another villager. The forest official says "we will have to put our foot down if they go ahead with construction on extra land." Patel, who used to trek across mountains and treacherous terrains that separate the deity from his Dhanakia village, says there is no way out. "Authorities will have to bow to our wishes."

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ROYAL RETREAT

Erstwhile royals of Jambughoda wildlife sanctuary jump on to heritage tourism bandwagon

In holiday mood? Head for Jambughoda sanctuary 10.8

ABHISHEK KAPOOR

VADODARA, JUNE 24

16/6/07

IT IS slotted to be the hippest happening holiday spot. For the Jambughoda Wildlife Sanctuary (JWS) — some 70 km from Vadodara, and home to flora and fauna as diverse as leopards, bears, blue bulls, owls, antelopes, porcupines and a variety of snakes — is being opened to the public by the erstwhile royal family of Jambughoda estate to boost “nature tourism” in the region.

Taking a leaf out of the book of royals in Rajasthan, who are selling

heritage tourism through royal retreats, the Rana family of Jambughoda too has joined the tourist bandwagon and is lobbying for added infrastructure in the region.

“We will provide royal accommodation which is close to the ground. The idea is that people should relax in the lap of nature, leaving all their worries behind,” says Yuvraj Vikramsinh Rana.

The region which is one of the few thickly wooded parts remaining in the state, provides an idyllic setting for a weekend escape. And to make the escape complete, Rana intends to keep

even a telephone connection out of reach once you are in the sprawling complex.

Once in, the jagged white dolomite mountains contrast with the brown plains in between, and the freshly rain-washed meandering road provides a perfect setting for a rejuvenating holiday.

The only company you are likely to have is photographs showcasing the grand days of the royals, when the who’s who of the world and the then government of *gore sahibs* jostled to rub shoulders with them.

Rana, who was associated with

getting the forests notified as a wildlife sanctuary a decade ago, feels strongly about the conservation of the place too. “We have taken utmost care to see that the sanctuary remains as pristine as possible. But unfortunately, the region has seen lot of denudation with a number of plant varieties becoming thin. I think about 40-odd varieties are already missing. If tourism could also be coupled with sensitising people about these things, then it would be of great help,” Rana says.

On this aspect of tourism, even the Forest Department sees eye to eye. A

management plan, which was prepared for the sanctuary some months ago, talked about the possibilities of eco-tourism aimed at educating city folk about issues associated with wildlife conservation. Jambughoda being a relatively small sanctuary could prove to be an ideal place for that.

“We are looking at very focussed eco-tourism inside the sanctuary. As the area is small and villages criss-cross the sanctuary, too much of interference could adversely affect wildlife,” said G. V. Vadi, Deputy Conservator of Forests (Wildlife).

Gujarat's liquor needs gulp 20 tonnes of wood a day

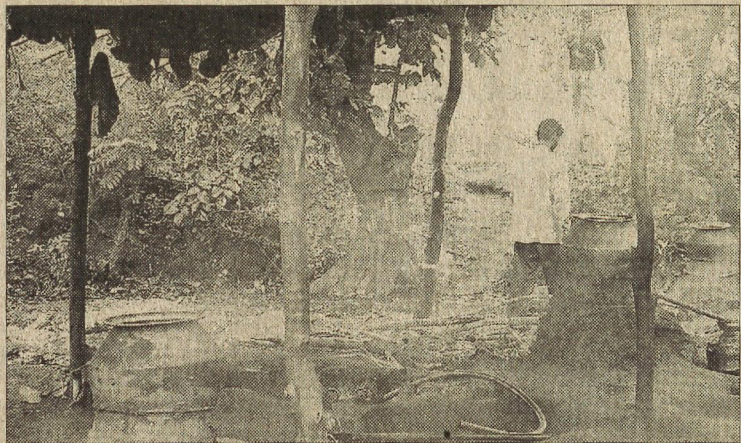
ABHISHEK KAPOOR
JAMBUGHODA, JUNE 23

TROUBLE is brewing in the tribal belts of Panchmahals and Vadodara. Thanks to Mahuda distilleries, not only is liquor flowing in dry Gujarat but a green belt is fast disappearing with breweries using wood from illegally-felled trees to stoke their *bhatti* fires.

A visit to an illegal distillery on the outskirts of Keva village in Panchmahal's Jambughoda taluka was an eye-opener. In a shack built on bamboo stilts, hidden behind thick foliage, hooch was being brewed.

"After the Mahuda season, the flowers are stored for later use," says Parvat, our guide. Just then, a customer arrived and bought four pouches packed in *timnu* leaves.

Along the fringes of forests and streams (as the *bhattis* also need wa-



An illegal distillery in Panchmahals. Express photo

ter), such illicit distilleries are common during mahuda season, say locals. Certain estimates put the wood felled for such breweries at about 20 tonnes per day.

During the rainy season, Parvat

says, it is difficult to run a brewery.

Vikramsinh Rana, Yuvraj of the erstwhile Jambughoda estate who is closely associated with the Jambughoda Wildlife Sanctuary (JWS), says such illegal felling of trees is ru-

ining the remaining forest cover of the region.

"Branches of trees are lopped when green, and after drying, picked up in the guise of forest produce. What I am more worried about is the destruction of forests, apart from the effect on social health," he adds.

Tribals consider drinking Mahuda a tradition, despite the local administration marking such distilleries as illegal. But the problem is not one of policing the licencing and operation of distilleries. Rather, it has complex political dimensions.

Panchmahal's police chief M.D. Antani says: "I do not know which area you are talking about. There is a belt on the eastern fringes of the district where this activity takes place. It's illegal but I am not in a position to say more, as it falls in the purview of the Prohibition Department."

Special Inspector-General of Police (Vadodara range) Rakesh Asthana admits the menace in the tribal belt, but adds that the police regularly carries out raids and seizures. He adds that it was ironic that this custom of drinking Mahuda was traditional and yet illegal.

The Forest Department also pleads helplessness. Deputy Conservator of Forests (Wildlife), in-charge of JWS, G.V. Vadi, says the century-old habit of consuming Mahuda is difficult to curb.

"So far as chopping of wood is concerned, we take care that the sanctuary area is not affected. We have 40 villages inside the sanctuary that have revenue lands marked. The wood could be taken from these areas," he says.

Vadodara Conservator of Forests, H.S. Singh, too, says felling on the fringes of forests is difficult to stop.

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