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PROTECTION OF NILGIRI ELEPHANT CORRIDOR: JUDICIAL INTERVENTION AND CONSERVATION

AUTHORED BY - GUNA

Abstract:

The Nilgiri Elephant Corridor case highlights the critical role of judicial intervention in protecting wildlife habitats and maintaining ecological balance. The Segur Plateau, a key migratory corridor for elephants in the Nilgiris, faced severe encroachment from private developments, leading to habitat fragmentation and increased human-elephant conflicts. Through Public Interest Litigations and the formation of inquiry committees, the courts emphasized the government's duty to protect ecological corridors under the Wildlife Protection Act, 1972, and the Forest Conservation Act, 1980. The judgments reaffirmed that development cannot compromise environmental sustainability and that safeguarding wildlife corridors is essential for biodiversity conservation and human safety.

Background of the Case:

The Nilgiri Elephant Corridor, also known as the Segur Plateau Elephant Corridor, is a vital migratory route connecting the Mudumalai Tiger Reserve in Tamil Nadu with forests in Karnataka and Kerala. It allows elephants and other wildlife to move safely between habitats in the Western Ghats.

Over time, private development, including resorts and homestays, began encroaching on this corridor. These activities caused habitat fragmentation, leading to increased human-elephant conflicts, crop damage, and threats to elephant survival.

Facts of the Case:

Private individuals and businesses acquired land in the corridor for resorts and tourism projects.

The Bombay Environmental Action Group (BEAG) type NGOs and other conservationists raised concerns about ecological damage.

A Public Interest Litigation (PIL) was filed in the Madras High Court to protect the corridor and remove illegal constructions.

In 2020, the Supreme Court set up the Segur Plateau Elephant Corridor Inquiry Committee to identify private encroachments and recommend conservation measures.

Issues Raised:

1. Whether private developments violated wildlife and forest protection laws.
2. Whether the government had a duty to protect wildlife corridors under the Wildlife Protection Act, 1972 and the Constitution.
3. How to balance private property rights with ecological conservation.

Arguments:

Petitioners / Conservationists:

Encroachments blocked elephant migration, causing human-animal conflicts. Government failed to enforce environmental and forest laws.

Corridors are protected under ecological principles and Supreme Court precedents. Respondents / Private Owners C Developers:

Claimed ownership rights over the land.

Argued that tourism development promotes local economy. Judgment / Court

Orders:

Madras High Court and Supreme Court emphasized the importance of elephant corridors for ecological balance.

The courts directed the removal of illegal resorts and constructions inside the corridor.

Recommended the acquisition of private land in sensitive areas and declaration of such lands as reserved forests.

Stressed strict enforcement of Wildlife Protection Act, 1972 and Forest Conservation Act, 1980.

Legal Principles Involved:

1. Article 21 – Right to life (includes right to live in a healthy environment).
2. Wildlife Protection Act, 1972 – Protection of endangered species and habitats.
3. Forest Conservation Act, 1980 – Restriction on diversion of forest land.
4. Principle of Ecological Sustainability – Ensuring wildlife corridors remain functional.
5. Precautionary and Public Trust Principles – Courts' proactive role in environmental protection.

Impact / Significance:

Strengthened judicial intervention in wildlife and forest conservation.

Set precedent for removal of illegal encroachments in ecologically sensitive zones. Raised public awareness about human-elephant conflict and habitat protection.

Demonstrated that development cannot override ecological concerns.

References:

1. Segur Plateau Elephant Corridor Inquiry Committee Report, 2020.
2. Nilgiri Elephant Corridor case judgments – Madras High Court C Supreme Court (2020–2024).
3. Wildlife Protection Act, 1972; Forest Conservation Act, 1980.

