

Site inspection report on proposal for rationalisation of boundaries of  
Balaram-Ambaji Wildlife Sanctuary (BAWS), Gujarat

Submitted to the Standing Committee of the National Board for Wildlife



A view of Balaram Ambaji Wildlife Sanctuary

**Site inspection team**

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**Members, Standing Committee of the NBWL**

**August 2013**

## ***Background***

Pursuant to the decision taken during the 28th meeting of the Standing Committee (SC) of the NBWL, the two above members of the SC carried out a site inspection of Balaram-Ambaji Wildlife Sanctuary, Gujarat to examine a proposal for the rationalisation of its boundaries.

## ***Site inspection details***

The sanctuary was inspected between 17th and 19th July 2013, in the presence of the CCF Gandhinagar Circle, Shri N.V. Kataria , the DCF Banaskantha Division, Shri J.V. Vyas, the ACF Ambaji, Shri C.N. Chaudhari, the ACF (Wildlife) Banaskantha Division, Shri N.M. Bhatl, the ACF Palanpur, Shri D.S. Solanki, as well as Range Forest Officers Shri A.J. Sindhi and Shri S.D. Ninama, and Forest Surveyors, Shri D.J. Barad and Shri J.M. Limbachia.

## ***Background facts***

The Balaram-Ambaji Wildlife Sanctuary is spread over 542.08 sq. km. of forest and is home to species such as leopards and sloth bear. The BAWS Management Plan for 2002-2007 states that tigers were reported in this area until the 1940s. The officers present at Ambaji stated that the sanctuary was notified on 7th August 1989. The entire sanctuary area of 54,208.02 ha falls in three tahsils of Palanpur district, i.e., Palanpur tahsil (38 villages; 24,065.67 ha), Danta tahsil (56 villages; 29,681.02 ha) and Wadagaon tahsil (01 village; 461.31 ha). According to the proposal, 5,357.90 ha area of Balaram-Ambaji Wildlife Sanctuary was proposed to be excluded from sanctuary, and 5,628.28 ha area was proposed to be included. The State Board for Wildlife had recommended the proposal on 19.7.2011.

The lands included in the sanctuary as per the first notification under Wildlife Protection Act 1972 has the following legal status-

*Table-1: Legal status of lands within Balaram-Ambaji Wildlife Sanctuary.*

<b>Legal Notification...</b>	<b>Area within WLS (ha)</b>
u/s 4 of the Indian Forest Act	38,974.23
u/s 20 of Indian Forest Act (RF status)	15,209.48

Revenue Lands	24.31
<b>Total</b>	<b>54,208.02</b>

The officers mentioned that the area proposed for exclusion was mainly degraded forest, fragmented in small patches and with 'honey-combing', therefore, it was argued, that it was necessary to rationalise the boundaries of the sanctuary. They further stated that 36 villages with 25,089 people and 19,723 livestock that were currently inside, were proposed to be deleted from BAWS. This is with the intention of making the sanctuary more compact and easier to manage through rationalisation of boundaries.

*Table-2: The legal status of lands to be excluded from the present limits of BAWS*

<b>Legal Notification...</b>	<b>Area within WLS (ha)</b>
u/s 4 of the Indian Forest Act	3,637.50
u/s 20 of Indian Forest Act (RF status)	1,720.40
<b>Total</b>	<b>5,357.90</b>

The proposed area of 5,628.28 ha to be included, we were told, mainly comprised dense vegetation and were in compact blocks that were contiguous with existing sanctuary area. Such compact, dense forests, it was argued, would help the wildlife conservation and management inside the PA. Overall the lands proposed for inclusion had the following legal status:

*Table-3: The legal status of lands proposed to be included into BAWS*

<b>Legal Notification...</b>	<b>Area within WLS (ha)</b>
u/s 4 of the Indian Forest Act	250.00
u/s 20 of Indian Forest Act ( RF status)	5,378.28
<b>Total</b>	<b>5,628.28</b>

### **Assessment:**

The committee undertook a detailed review of the BAWS notification and process of settlement of rights under section 18 to 26 of Wildlife Protection Act, 1972. Assistant Commissioner of Palanpur was appointed as the Enquiry Officer in 1993, and had submitted his enquiry report (settlement report) on 20th May 2000. Along with the claims from local residents from villages in Amirgad, Palanpur and Danta tahsil, he had

also received claims of rights from mine owners in Amirgad, Danta, Wadagaon and Palanpur tahsil. The enquiry report also mention to exclude 33.10 ha area of Balaram river from the sanctuary. The BAWS Management Plan states (on p 27) that the settlement of rights and privileges has happened within areas finally notified as reserved forests under the Indian Forest Act, but remains pending within areas that have been notified under Section 4 of the Indian Forest Act. The final notification of the sanctuary is yet to be issued.

We also noted that after the year 2000, the following areas of sanctuary have been diverted for the purposes below with permission from the National Board for Wildlife

*Table 4: Details of projects for which diversions have been permitted from BAWS*

<b>Name of project</b>	<b>Area diverted in ha</b>	<b>Year of diversion</b>
Balaram Ambaji road (River Bridge)	1.95	15.1.1993
Khandorumri Dericharda Road	5.43	5.9.2001
Kanpura Minor Irrigation Scheme	7.28	16.10.1992
Petsura Minor Irrigation Scheme	5.05	9.6.2003
Ambaji town water supply scheme	1.56	8.2.2007
Widening of existing 2 lane into 4 lane NH-14 highway from Palanpur to Pindwada, KM 306.4 to KM 340.0 by NHAI.	4.924	28.11.2008

The main purpose of assessment by the Standing Committee was to ascertain whether the areas proposed to be deleted matched the justification given for their deletion, and if such a deletion would have no adverse impact on the wildlife that BAWS was meant to protect. Another aspect considered in our site inspection was also to assess whether the area proposed for addition was indeed ecologically valuable and could be managed better for wildlife as part of BAWS. Based on our site visit, we make the following observations about areas proposed for deletion as well as addition.

**Observations on area to be deleted-**

1. Although the 5,357.90 ha area is proposed for denotification mainly to exclude 36 revenue villages, the extent of revenue land in the area proposed for deletion is

merely 24.31 ha. As such, this reflects a mismatch between the stated objective and the proposed action.

2. The forest officers accompanying the site inspection team themselves agreed to retain approximately 2,630 ha of forest area with the sanctuary after visiting each of these parcels. This decision was based on their acknowledgement that the forest areas they contained were of very good quality , and/or had excellent habitat connectivity with other portions of the BAWs that were to be retained. The details of such areas is shown in Table 5 below.

*Table 5: The forest survey numbers proposed for deletion, but found to be worthy of retention within BAWs.(Refer the attached map)*

<b>Villages</b>	<b>Survey number</b>	<b>Sec-4 (ha)</b>	<b>Sec-20 (ha)</b>	<b>Total (ha)</b>	<b>Comment</b>
Mahuda	57 pt	0	141.64	141.64	
Khemrajia	58	477.95	0	477.59	
Pedagra	63	61.36	0	--	
	64	26.17	0	87.53	
Jadiyal	28,32-38,44-49, 88,29	122.10	0	122.10	
Hathidara	149, 46 pt	789.61	0	789.61	Repeat survey needs to be carried out
Koteshwar	62	652.84	0	--	Excellent forests. Catchment of River Saraswati.
	63	30.01	0	--	
	65	17.34	0	700.19	
Kansa	124 pt	0	157.34	157.34	Repeat survey needs to be carried out to measure other side of hill.
Dhanpura	609	108.77	0	108.77	Area up to road needs to be calculated
Chikanvas	198	45.33	0	45.33	
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>2331.48</b>	<b>298.98</b>	<b>2630.5</b>	

3. The forests of Koteshwar village on the hill, in particular, appeared to be excellent wildlife habitat, but were still proposed for deletion. This area is also the catchment of River Saraswati, which is associated with a famous temple, also situated along the same river. We strongly feel that the forests of Koteshwar should be retained within BAWS. We also note that retaining this within the BAWS would bring 44 marble mines (stretching across 190 ha and belonging to 36 owners) within the safety zone of BAWS in which Supreme Court has forbidden mining (See the Picture 2 & 3 below).



*Picture 2,3: Marble mines near Ambaji village in an area adjacent to the Koteshwar hill.*

4. We also note that in the areas proposed for deletion, there is hardly any human-wildlife conflict worth noting.
5. However, in certain areas proposed for deletions (i.e., not including areas listed above in Table 5), we do accept the presence of protrusions/invaginations in the boundary that pose problems not only to the BAWS management, but also to people who reside in those areas.

#### **Observations on area to be added**

1. The proposed area of 5,628.28 ha to be added in to the sanctuary (shown in purple colour in the attached map) mainly comprises reserved forest (see Table 3 ) notified under Sec. 20 of Indian Forest Act, 1927. The entire area has only 12 villages, most of which lie on the periphery of otherwise-compact forests. In general, we found the areas suggested for addition indeed valuable areas for inclusion in BAWS.
2. The two forest areas located inside the BAWS (please refer the attached map) were found unsurveyed at the time of sanctuary notification and hence, unaccounted

either under revenue or forest records. One of these was located at Ambapani area near Bhamaria at Amirgad talao, and another at Kansa in Danta tahsil. They remain free from human habitation so far. Hence, we recommend that these unaccounted (recently surveyed) areas, which total to nearly 700 ha, be added to BAWS as they may otherwise become vulnerable to other forms of land-use change and encroachment.



*Picture 4: Area to be included in WLS, already part of proposed ESA.*

3. Representatives of a quarry owners' association from Jasvantgadh met the committee and submitted a representation. In this representation, they expressed the fear that if the sanctuary were extended to edge of the reserve forest patches of Danta as per the proposal, it may result in drawing of ESZ boundaries such that the existing 75 quarries on private lands at Jasvantgadh might be asked to halt operation. We were informed by officials that there were *prima facie* no violations in the operations of these quarries, and therefore, given that these appeared to be ongoing activities that were legitimate, we are of the opinion that the ESA boundary in this area may be restricted to the adjoining forest area such that they exclude the quarries so that their operations on private land are not affected. (see Picture 5).



*Picture 5: Private area of 75 quarries, may be affected due to ESA notification after proposed sanctuary extension. Picture 6: The mining activity near Ambaji temple/village.*

### ***Other issues***

1. In considering proposals for deletion of forests from BAWS, we note that it is important to maintain the continuity between BAWL and the Jessore WLS towards west. So , it is also important to consider habitat contiguity towards Mount Abu WLS in Rajasthan, which is just 20 km away from Ambaji town and 10 km from the northern boundary of BAWS, as well as to habitats further to the east of BAWS towards Kotda.
2. There are many temples established close to Ambaji temple such as Ambaji mata temple, Kumbhariaji Jain temple, Gabbar hills, Koteswar Mahadev temple. We learn that approximately 5-6 lakh pilgrims visit these temples every week. In the month of September, we understand that around 27-30 lakh pilgrims visit Ambaji temple, which leads to a considerable problem of solid waste disposal in the surrounding sanctuary area. Even at the time of the site visit, the committee came across garbage dumped inside the sanctuary area. In order to ensure this, the commercial activities around Ambaji temple like pilgrim tourism need to be regulated in order to reduce the adverse impacts on sanctuary.
3. We understand that in the areas immediately adjacent to BAWS near Ambaji, mines are currently shut down under Supreme Court orders. In the long term interest of the well being of this sanctuary, maintenance of these areas free from mining pressures would considerably aid wildlife recovery

### **Recommendations:**

1. Although the 5,357.90 ha of forest from BAWS was proposed for denotification, mainly to exclude 36 revenue villages, we reiterate that the village revenue land proposed for deletion from the BAWS is merely 24.31 ha, with no reports of any significant human-wildlife conflict. Therefore, we felt that the denotification of an area as large as was proposed, was not adequately justified. The forest officers accompanying the committee themselves agreed to retain approximately 2,630 ha of forest area (see Table 5 and attached map) within the sanctuary owing to the excellent quality of these forests. However, we do agree that in the remainder of areas, deletion may be warranted. The Chief Wildlife Warden has also agreed on ecological importance of areas mentioned in the Table 5 for the sanctuary, and expressed the willingness to repeat surveys to reassess and eliminate ecologically valuable areas proposed for deletion. We recommend, therefore, that this proposal be resubmitted with the above changes, but including the remaining areas for deletion.
2. The committee, by and large, agrees with the areas proposed for addition to the BAWS. The area of 5,628.28 ha to be added in to the sanctuary is mainly reserved forest and has only 12 villages, which mostly on the periphery of otherwise-compact forests. We noted two unsurveyed forest areas (at the time of sanctuary notification) located inside the WLS , one at Ambapani area near Bhamaria at Amirgad talao and another at Kansa in Danta tahsil, and suggest that these areas too should be incorporated in the areas to be added to the sanctuary.
3. We also recommend that, in the RFs east of Danta being included, especially south of the Nargarh-Navavas road, the ESA boundary may be restricted to the adjoining forest area such that it excludes existing quarries so that their operations on private land are not affected.
4. We recommend that the Chief Wildlife Warden should consider the above points about areas to be deleted and proposed for addition and submit a revised proposal to the Standing Committee for its consideration. While resubmitting this proposal, we recommend that a justification for deletion be provided for each survey number where deletion is proposed. We think this would be a healthy practice wherever deletions from PAs are proposed as part of any PA boundary rationalisation process.
5. We take this opportunity to suggest that the commercial activities around Ambaji temple like pilgrim tourism need be regulated to reduce the adverse impacts on

sanctuary, especially in terms of solid waste disposal and fuelwood use. The CWLW may consider imposing some form of an "entry fee" from pilgrims and plough the money back into the upkeep of BAWS by employing people from Ambaji village to assist with better solid waste management. This can also sustain a modest level of conservation-based employment (to lower dependence at least to some extent on mining based livelihoods) in Ambaji village.