

In a global first, World Bank funds a zoo in India

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NEW DELHI: The World Bank usually tames wild economies and helps countries stabilize their fluctuating finances, but in a global first, the banker for the world has gone to a zoo that too in India! This is a new addition in the portfolio of the bank as part of its ever-expanding work on urban regeneration.

A zoo is nothing but a bank of captive animals. In a novel initiative, the World Bank has embraced a zoo for its eco-development!

In Visakhapatnam, the global bank is extending an assistance of \$20 million to help reconstruct the Indira Gandhi Zoological Park (IGZP), which got devastated during cyclone Hudhud. This is part of the \$370 million Andhra Pradesh Disaster Recovery Project for which the bank is extending assistance of \$250 million from 2015-2020.

The much-loved Vizag zoo is nestled in the picturesque Eastern Ghats. It sees an annual footfall of about 8 lakh people and was set up in 1972 and shot into fame because it had some aviaries designed by the legendary ornithologist Salim Ali, the 'bird man of India'.

Neha Vyas, senior environment specialist at the India country office of the World Bank who is actively involved in this eco-development project, asserts that this is "the very first time in the history of the World Bank that it is directly involved in a zoo".

The Vizag zoo situated on the northern limit of the Visakhapatnam town houses 170 different species of animals on its 250-hectare campus. Only a road separates the zoo from the sea and this became its undoing, when Hudhud struck the region it caused huge damage to the entire zoo.

According to a damages needs assessment report by the World Bank, almost 40 per cent of the trees of the complex were flattened and a larger number were damaged. Some 180 birds and animals escaped from their enclosures as the cages were badly damaged and 11 animals died due to the cyclone. Out of 67 enclosures about 57 suffered damages.

"Unfortunately for the zoo, the eye of the cyclone Hudhud passed right over it causing widespread devastation in the zoological park," says Vyas.

The enclosures for tiger, python and the white tiger were severely damaged. The offices including the veterinary hospital were also affected and the compound wall was breached in several places. The adjoining Kambalakonda Wildlife Sanctuary was also damaged.

Cyclone Hudhud was classed in the "very severe" category and it crashed into Andhra Pradesh on October 12, 2014. Sixty-one people lost their lives in the natural calamity.

According to the Andhra Pradesh government, Hudhud affected about 9.2 million people in over 7,285 villages in 4 coastal districts of the state. The damage caused by the cyclone was due to the unprecedented wind velocity of over 200 km per hour followed by torrential rains that caused massive destruction in the districts of Visakhapatnam, Srikakulam, Vizianagaram and East Godavari. According to The World Bank, the cyclone caused a damage equivalent of \$2,155 million and over two lakh houses were affected.

At the zoological park where local support to retain it on its original location is widespread, the World Bank partnering with the Andhra Pradesh Forest Department and the Central Zoo Authority will help bring back the pristine glory of the zoo.

It will also help re-build the eco-tourism park at the Kambalakonda Wildlife Sanctuary.

At the zoo, the effort will be to build in disaster resilience into the civil structures; re-establish lost nurseries to establish green shelter beds that act as windbreaks.

Deepak Singh, senior disaster management expert at the World Bank's India office, says, "The endeavour is to demonstrate how a disaster resilient zoo can be scientifically re-modelled", adding "the zoo plays an important part in the education, recreation and conservation and it fits in nicely in the concept of having a smart Visakhapatnam".

The World Bank has a portfolio of about \$26 billion for India where it partners in about 89 projects. Disaster management and recovery are becoming a big part of the World Bank's activities in India where it is providing assistance of about \$2.2 billion for 10 projects.

In a one-of-its-kind rolling audit on wheels to assess the impact of its efforts on the coastal projects, a 10-member multi-national team of the World Bank is currently visiting all 10 coastal states on a specially designed bus that will tour the Indian coast for a month.

Called 'Road to Resilience', the 10,000-km continuous road trip on this special bus by the officials of the World Bank will travel all along the Indian coast from West Bengal to Gujarat and will provide support and oversight for the 6 coastal projects.

The team is scheduled to visit the zoo later this week after having visited the Sunderbans and the cyclone prone areas of Odisha where the World Bank is helping set up over 300 multi-purpose cyclone relief shelters.

Vyas says at the Visakhapatnam zoo "effort is to ensure ecological restoration of an area that will be resilient and have a minimum footprint" for a large outdoor recreational area almost within the city limits. The World Bank is currently in talks with the Smithsonian Institution that runs the world famous National Zoo in Washington DC, USA to see if their expertise can be tapped to re-develop the Vizag zoo as a model 21st century 'ecological park'.

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Just fantastic ! Good work world bank :-)

Kautillya Raj

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The IGZP is already a breeding centre for the Indian Wild Dog or the Dhole and it is hoped the 'modern' version will house an even better breeding centre.

Restoration of the IGZP is a pet project of Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister N Chandrababu Naidu, who has vowed to make it even better than the Nehru Zoological Park at Hyderabad in Telangana, and the current effort is likely to offer a working blue print for setting up a state-of-the-art zoo at Guntur.

This unique one-of-its-kind push by the World Bank where it is providing assistance to an Indian zoo will add value to the 100 'Smart City' initiative being spearheaded by Prime Minister Narendra Modi where urban regeneration and open spaces are key elements.

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