

Plastic ban likely at Bhimashankar sanctuary

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Pune: The forest department (wildlife) is considering a ban on plastic in Bhimashankar wildlife sanctuary, which is littered with plastic bags and garbage. The river basin near the temple is also clogged with polythene bags.

In a recent meeting, local vendors, trustees of the temple, villagers, NGOs and officials have agreed to support the ban, M K Rao, conservator of forest (wildlife), told TOI. "We have asked the village 'sarpanch' to give us in writing about the support. Following which, we will submit a proposal to the chief wildlife warden. The Wildlife Protection Act states that use of plastic and hazardous materials can be regulated," he said.

The sanctuary, located in Ambegaon taluka of Pune district, is the home of the giant Indian Giant Squirrel and a large number of other animals and birds. Spread over 130 sq km in the Western Ghats, the sanctuary attracts thousands of visitors, particularly in the month of Shravan as Bhimashankar houses one of the 12 jyotirlingas.

"Most of the plastic at the sanc-



Plastic waste along a trek route in Bhimashankar

tuary come from packaged food. The tourists do not bother to use garbage bins. Thus, policing and enforcement is necessary. The vendors, local people and the forest department have to work together, Rao said.

"On every Monday and during Shravan month, there is heavy inflow of visitors. This results in noise pollution by vehicles and littering of the sanctuary. At the en-

try point itself the visitors have to be made aware of the necessity to maintain silence and cleanliness, Rao said. Another meeting will be held in January, he added.

NGOs working in the area have been demanding a ban on plastic at the sanctuary. For the last two years, students of Tokawade and Terungun ashram schools had written letters to the district collector, forest department and other concerned

authorities, seeking a ban on plastics on the sanctuary premises.

Sharmila Deo, coordinator of the educational programme of Kalpavriksh (an NGO) in Bhimashankar, said: "The concern lies in the fact that there is no system of garbage disposal. More than 100,000 people visit the temple every month, while around 2 lakh congregate here during Mahashivratri and Tripuri Purnima.

The plastic bags were hazardous to wildlife, especially to the endangered giant squirrel and herbivores, she said.

Rao said that, "Most of the littering is from the eateries and defecation. There are no toilets and people resort to open defecation and leave the water bottles behind. If the facilities are provided, it will be easier to keep the sanctuary clean."

The National Board of Wildlife has cleared construction of three new toilet blocks, 600-metre road from temple to bus stand, compound wall around bus stand and a new bus stand. "We have written to the executive engineer, public works department, north Pune, for identifying the agency which will take up the work," Rao added.