

GOA ACTIVISTS CHALLENGE GREEN CREDIT RULES, SC SEEKS ANSWERS

Apex Court demands an explanation from Environment Ministry as eco-crusaders and allies warn that this initiative could destroy fragile ecosystems

Team Herald

MARGAO: The Supreme Court has demanded an explanation from the Union Ministry of Environment, Forest & Climate Change (MoEFCC) after environmentalists led by Goa-based group Rainbow Warriors (RW), challenged a new credit system meant to increase the country's green cover.

The shortcomings could adversely affect India's forest conservation efforts and compromise the rights of Indigenous people, the greens argued.

The court, acknowledging legitimate ecological concerns raised in the petition, emphasised the need for balancing afforestation efforts with ecological sustainability as it ordered the ministry to respond to the serious allegations. The MoEFCC has now asked for additional time to file a detailed reply.

The plea, filed in early March 2025 by Rainbow Warriors from Goa alongside People for Aravallis, targets the government's Green Credit Rules (GCR) that allow companies to earn tradable credits by planting trees – credits that can later be used to fulfil compensatory afforestation requirements when forest land is diverted for non-forestry purposes. The Goan environmental organisation, which has been actively involved in protecting the



PRAYERS BEFORE APEX COURT

- It will ruin India's important forest landscapes
- 692-km Aravalli ranges spread over 4 States, biodiversity in peril
- GCR exempts entities from planting tree saplings to get green credit only on basis of tree plantation
- Entities don't have a responsibility to ensure 'survival' and maintenance of trees
- Survival rate range from 6 per cent to 30 percent of trees which is contrary to intention of such plantation

Western Ghats, spearheaded the intervention application as part of an existing challenge to amendments in the Forest Conservation Act. "Plant and forget is what these rules essentially permit," said Abhijit Prabhudesai, Federation of Rainbow Warriors General Secretary. "Companies can get credit just for putting saplings in the ground with absolutely no responsibility for keeping them alive. That's not conservation – it's an ecological threat."

The petition, represented by Senior Advocate Anitha Shenoy and Advocate on Re-

cord Rashmi Nandakumar, highlights reports from the Comptroller and Auditor General revealing the grim reality behind tree plantation schemes across India. According to these audits, only 6-30% of planted trees actually survive in various States – a damning statistic that petitioners argue renders the current rules essentially meaningless for environmental protection.

Perhaps more alarming is the petitioner's claim that the rules could actively harm India's diverse ecosystems by mandating plantations in environ-

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– Abhijit Prabhudesai, Federation of Rainbow Warriors, General Secretary

Planting trees in naturally treeless ecosystems is ecological malpractice. India's savanna grasslands support critically endangered species like the Great Indian Bustard and numerous other threatened plants and animals. Forcing artificial forests onto these landscapes doesn't fight climate change – it destroys irreplaceable biodiversity

– Malaika Mathew Chawla, Wildlife Biologist

We're asking that companies be held responsible for tree survival over time, not just planting them. We want the arbitrary requirement of 1,100 trees per hectare reconsidered, plantations prohibited in sensitive ecosystems, and assurance that forest rights won't be compromised

– Neelam Ahluwalia, Founder Member of People for Aravallis

ments that naturally don't support trees. The current framework prescribes planting 1,100 trees per hectare without scientific backing and allows plantations in open forests, scrub lands, and areas officially designated as 'wastelands' – many of which are actually vital ecosystems like savanna grasslands.

"We felt it was critical to challenge these Green Credit Rules to save the highly threatened Western Ghats in Goa, along with the Aravallis and all other natural ecosystems across India," explained Prabhudesai. "Our home

State's unique biodiversity faces serious risks if these rules are implemented in their current form."

"Planting trees in naturally treeless ecosystems is ecological malpractice," added Wildlife Biologist Malaika Mathew Chawla. "India's savanna grasslands support critically endangered species like the Great Indian Bustard and numerous other threatened plants and animals. Forcing artificial forests onto these landscapes doesn't fight climate change – it destroys irreplaceable biodiversity."

The petition also rais-

es serious concerns about potential violations of the Forest Rights Act. According to the Ministry of Tribal Affairs, over 117,683 communities currently hold forest rights titles that could be jeopardised if plantations under the Green Credit Rules proceed without proper safeguards. This creates a potential clash between environmental initiatives and indigenous rights that the court will need to navigate.

Neelam Ahluwalia, Founder Member of People for Aravallis, outlined their specific requests to the Supreme Court: "We're asking that companies be held responsible for tree survival over time, not just planting them. We want the arbitrary requirement of 1,100 trees per hectare reconsidered, plantations prohibited in sensitive ecosystems, and assurance that forest rights won't be compromised."

The Green Credit Rules, first notified in October 2023 and supplemented with calculation methodologies in February 2024, were positioned as a market-based mechanism to incentivize environmental conservation through tradable credits. Companies can earn these credits through activities like tree planting and then use them to meet corporate social responsibility requirements or as environmental, social and governance leadership indicators.

Cuncolim, Sao Jose de Areal bye-election results declared

Soares wins in Cuncolim's Ward 10; Sandeep emerges victor in Sao Jose de Areal's Ward 2



Soares Crisostomo Mariano



Sandeep Ram Naik

Team Herald

MARGAO: The results of the bye-elections held on Sunday for Ward 10 of the Cuncolim Municipal Council (CMC) and Ward 2 of the Sao Jose de Areal Village Panchayat were announced on Monday after a day of intense counting. The elections, which saw impressive voter turnouts, culminated in decisive victories for

Soares Crisostomo Mariano in Cuncolim and Sandeep Ram Naik in Sao Jose de Areal. In CMC, Mariano emerged triumphant with 453 votes, securing 59.61% of the total votes cast. Backed by Cuncolim MLA and Leader of Opposition Yuri Alemao, Mariano's victory was celebrated by his

supporters and the opposition camp, who hailed the result as a reflection of the people's trust in their leadership. The bye-election was necessitated following the demise of councillor Rahul Desai. His opponent, former two-time councillor Premdeep Desai, put up a strong fight but fell short in the final tally.

Meanwhile, in Sao Jose de Areal Village Panchayat, Sandeep Ram Naik clinched victory with 197 votes, accounting for 37.17% of the total votes. The bye-election in this ward saw an even higher voter turnout of 74.33%. Naik's supporters also hailed his victory.

The counting of votes for both bye-elections took place at the District Collector's office on Monday morning.

Cavelossim P'yat files police complaint against hawkers, touts

Team Herald

MARGAO: Cavellossim Village Panchayat filed a police complaint with the Colva Police against hawkers, lamenis and touts harassing tourists on the beach in violation of the provision of the Tourism Act. Cavellossim sarpanch Dixon Vaz with the help of women Pink Police Force identified such hawkers on the beach and he urged the Colva Police to take further action so that a deterrent is set in place. Vaz added that the panchayat had tried to put in place its own system, but the hawkers were not moving from the beach and thus police action was required.

He said that they had to take such steps as tourism in the village and the beach was suffering with tourists complaining about not getting any peace or being allowed to relax as they were constantly being heckled by the hawkers, who keep trying to sell various items or services to the tourists.

The Sarpanch lamented that there is also the issue of stray dog menace with the number of tourists having been bitten by dogs increasing. He showed how they have been keeping records of such injuries and asked the government to intervene in this matter too, before it is too late.

DANGER ZONE



A small portion of the road in front of the Police Headquarters in Panjim has caved in, posing a hazard to pedestrians and passing vehicles

Goa's rivers need rescue from casinos and pollution, says fisheries leader

Team Herald

MARGAO: Goa's waterways face multiple threats requiring immediate intervention, according to recommendations made by Dr Sebastiao Rodrigues at the Niti Aayog Voluntary National Review in New Delhi. Rodrigues, who serves as General Secretary of the National Federation of Small-Scale Fishworkers (NFSF) and is associated with the All Goa Small Scale Responsible Fisheries Union (AGSSRFU), presented a comprehensive set of solutions to restore the state's struggling fisheries sector.

"The Mandovi River, once teeming with fish, has been transformed into a 'gambling den' with floating casino vessels that drive away marine life through noise pollution from engines," Rodrigues told the review panel. He called for the complete removal of all casino vessels from the river and urged authorities to clear debris that has accumulated, which blocks fish movement from the Arabian Sea.

The Zuari River faces a different threat, with approximately two lakh square meters leased to private companies for marina development. These 30-year lease agreements, signed in October 2010 by the Mormugao Port Trust (MPT), made no acknowl-



The Mandovi River, once teeming with fish, has been transformed into a 'gambling den' with floating casino vessels that drive away marine life through noise pollution from engines

– Dr Sebastiao Rodrigues, NFSF, General Secretary

The devastating impact of open cast iron ore mines received particular attention, with Rodrigues noting how these operations have caused siltation and flooding of the Cudnem, Bicholim, and Kushavati rivers. His straightforward recommendation: shut down all mines in the catchment areas of these rivers.

Rodrigues also highlighted how the National Waterways Act 2017 and Major Ports Authority Act 2021 undermine fishing communities' rights, with six Goan rivers now designated as National Waterways and the MPT transformed into the Mormugao Port Authority with expanded powers. He warned that these legal frameworks have "legally annihilated fishing communities wherever applied," concentrating power in the hands of authorities like the Inland Waterways Authority of India.

edgment of existing fishing communities. Rodrigues recommended that the Union Ministry of Shipping cancel both marina lease deeds immediately. Pollution plagues the Sal River due to sewage discharge, while the Chapora, Tiracol, Mandovi, and Zuari rivers suffer from extensive sand mining that destroys fish habitats. Rodrigues called for a halt to all sand mining activities in these fishing grounds and the creation of a dedicated legal entity to protect and restore the Sal River.

Goa's young innovators shine at global robotics championship in Pune

Teams showcase technical brilliance, cultural pride at FIRST Tech Challenge India 2025, winning accolades and hearts

Team Herald

MARGAO: Goa's young innovators made the state proud at the FIRST Tech Challenge (FTC) India Championship 2025, held in Pune from February 28 to March 2, securing impressive accolades and showcasing the spirit of teamwork, innovation, and cultural pride. Competing against over 45 teams from India, Kazakhstan, Sri Lanka, and the UAE, three Goan teams—Tech Infinity, Curious Minds, and Progressive Bots—delivered standout performances, proving that Goa is a rising force in robotics and STEM education.

The rookie team, Progressive Bots, formed just 15 days before the competition, stunned everyone by winning the 2nd Runner-up in the Judges' Choice Award category. Their achievement was particularly remarkable given their limited



Goan teams worked together to bring in laurels for the state by celebrating heritage a national platform

preparation time. Tech Infinity, returning for their second year, improved their ranking significantly, moving up from 38 last year to 23, while Curious Minds climbed from 40 to 27, showcasing consistent growth and determination.

What made the Goan teams stand out was not just their technical skills but how they worked together. Tech Infinity extended technical and logistical support to their fellow Goan teams, sharing kits, mentoring in robot building and coding, and even managing trans-

port and accommodation for the teams traveling to Pune. Curious Minds provided their school hall as a shared lab space, enabling all teams to practice together and refine their strategies. Progressive Bots, despite being newcomers, contributed significantly by helping strategize gameplay and optimizing scoring techniques. This spirit of collaboration ensured that Goa was represented by well-prepared and competitive robots at the national level.

Beyond robotics, the Goan teams proudly cel-

ebrated their heritage on a national platform. Tech Infinity showcased Shigmotsav, drawing inspiration from Goa's mechanical floats to influence their robotics journey. Their members performed a Shigmotsav dance and a stand-up comedy act, captivating the audience. Curious Minds embraced Carnival, presenting vibrant decor and exhibits that reflected the festive spirit of Goa. Progressive Bots highlighted Christmas, featuring traditional Koli dance performances that added a unique

cultural touch to their presentation. This fusion of technology and tradition not only set the Goan teams apart but also highlighted the rich cultural tapestry of the state.

Adding to the team's achievements was Vedang Anay Kamat, a 4th standard student and one of Tech Infinity's drivers, who made history as the youngest driver ever in the FIRST Tech Challenge India Championship. His participation was a shining example of how age is no barrier to innovation and excellence.

Row over shed at Rachol gram sabha

Team Herald

MARGAO: The controversy surrounding the Material Recovery Facility (MRF) shed took center stage during the gram sabha of the Rachol village panchayat held on Sunday.

At the meeting, chaired by Sarpanch Joseph Vaz, members raised several questions regarding the

shed's size and the financial expenditure incurred by the panchayat on the project. The discussions became heated as gram sabha members pressed for detailed explanations from the sarpanch.

This was not the first time the MRF shed issue had come up, as similar concerns were raised at previous gram sabha meet-

ings. Members once again sought clarity on the dimensions of the facility and the total funds allocated for its construction.

In addition to the MRF shed debate, some gram sabha members also pointed out discrepancies in the budget estimates for the financial year 2025-26, which were presented during the meeting.