

India's first "High-Altitude Wildlife Safari" to begin in Ladakh

First govt model where local communities will be made equal partners in protecting and promoting Ladakh's wildlife and benefiting economically

L-G VK Saxena approves guided wildlife safari on snow-leopard and bird-watching trails in high-altitude areas of Ladakh

Leh, August 6: Adding a new dimension to the vibrant eco-tourism in Ladakh, Lieutenant Governor, Shri Vinai Kumar Saxena has approved introducing "wildlife safari" on popular snow-leopard and bird-watching trails in high-altitude regions of the Union Territory. This would be India's first-ever "high-altitude wildlife safari", providing the visitors with a rare guided opportunity to witness Ladakh's distinctive flora and fauna.

The LG has directed the Forest Department to introduce guided Jeep Safari on the lines of popular National Parks like Kaziranga, Ranthambore and others, using specially designed open-back vehicles, to be operated by trained local drivers and guides. The objective behind introducing guided safaris is to prevent incidents of illegal off-roading and disturbing wildlife, besides strengthening sustainable and responsible eco-friendly tourism and enhancing visitor experience.

The decision was taken in the first governing body meeting of the newly constituted Snow Leopard and High-Altitude Nature (SHAN) Conservation Society, chaired by LG Shri Saxena. The Lieutenant Governor has directed the Forest Department to explore the possible safari routes across Hemis National Park, Changthang and Karakoram Wildlife Sanctuaries, apart from areas like Nubra, Zaskar, Sham, Kargil and Drass, that are known to have a sizable presence of elusive snow leopards and vivid avian diversity.

It has further been decided that 20 local youth will be selected, trained in birdwatching, bird identification and bird-spotting skills and will be provided with equipment like binoculars. Besides, 10 bird-watching hides will be created at major hot-spots.

Notably, Ladakh is home to India's largest snow leopard population – 477 of the country's estimated 718 snow leopards. Ladakh also supports over 38 mammal species, 340 bird species and 1,800 vascular plant species that have drawn substantial tourist attraction over the years.

The SHAN Society, constituted by the Lieutenant Governor on June 16 this year, seeks to formulate a comprehensive roadmap for community-

led wildlife conservation, waste management and promoting plastic-free tourism, sustainable livelihood generation and responsible tourism across Ladakh.

SHAN Society envisages a unique model of environment conservation in Ladakh, wherein the government alone will not be responsible for environment protection, but local communities will be made active partners in protecting Ladakh's fragile ecosystem and wildlife. This will instil a sense of custodianship among the people, while creating sustainable livelihood opportunities for them.

L-G Shri Saxena termed Ladakh's unique wildlife and fragile high-altitude ecosystem as its greatest natural asset and said that conservation efforts could only succeed when local communities become equal partners in protecting nature and also benefit economically from it.

"Through SHAN, we are creating a model that integrates wildlife conservation, responsible eco-tourism, environmental education, empowering local communities and creating sustainable livelihoods for them. These efforts aim at conserving Ladakh's natural heritage so that future generations inherit an ecosystem that is richer, healthier and more resilient. Our vision is to establish Ladakh as a global example of community-led conservation and responsible high-altitude mountain tourism," said L-G Shri Saxena.

Other major decisions taken in the SHAN Governing Body meeting include:

1. Installing 300 colour-coded waste bins in 40 villages for waste management.
2. Procuring portable cart-based dustbins for easier waste handling and segregation of waste at source.
3. Launching a plastic-free tourism campaign across Ladakh.
4. Establishing SHAN Wildlife Clubs in 50 Government schools, with a fund of Rs 30,000 per school, to conduct wildlife excursions for students.
5. Organising wildlife photography fellowships for 10 local youths every year and creating awareness through documentaries, brochures and other publications.

6. Putting up interpretative signages in protected areas to caution tourists from littering, violating environmental norms, illegal off-roading and disturbing the wildlife.

7. Training of 50 women artisans in producing high-quality miniature replicas of the Snow Leopard, Black-necked Crane and other wildlife.

8. Establishing wildlife souvenir shops across Ladakh.

The L-G further directed the concerned agencies to complete all preparations before the commencement of the snow-leopard sighting season during the winters this year.

