

# Bengal eyes Sundarbans tiger habitat merger

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**Calcutta:** The double-engine government has fuelled hope that the tiger habitats of south Bengal will soon be brought under a unified administrative control, leading to better conservation of the apex predator.

A proposed merger of the tiger habitats of the South 24-Parganas forest division with the Sundarban Tiger Reserve (STR) has been pending despite being cleared by the National Board for Wildlife and the National Tiger Conservation Authority.

The merger can be formalised only after the state government issues a notification. That notification has been pending for nearly a year, with a section of foresters alleging that the previous state government delayed the process by sitting on the administrative decision to issue it.

Following the merger, the Sundarbans will become the second-largest tiger reserve among 58 such sanctuaries in India. The Nagarjunasagar-Srisaïlam Tiger Reserve is the largest.

“It is a good proposal. We will do whatever is needed to expedite it. I will talk to the chief minister about this,” said Manoj Oraon, Bengal’s new forest minister.

The proposal had been in the works for at least a decade.

After securing approvals from the state forest department and the state wildlife



**A trap camera image of a tiger in the Sundarbans**

board, the proposal was forwarded to the National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA).

The NTCA, the Union environment ministry’s statutory body responsible for technical decisions on tiger conservation, approved the proposal in 2023.

The proposal was approved at a meeting of the National Board for Wildlife in August 2025.

A source in the Union ministry of environment, forest and climate change said the new Bengal government was expected to expedite the process and not delay the notification.

Soumitra Dasgupta, member of the National Board for Wildlife and director (programme) of the International Big Cat Alliance, told **Metro**: “Tiger reserves are accorded special protection provisions under the Indian Wildlife Act. They get more funds than other areas. Once the merger is formalised, tiger

management and conservation in South 24-Parganas will become more powerful. There will be minimal human interference. The staff working there will get better pay. There will be more incentive for them to work diligently.”

Dasgupta, former head of the forest force in Bengal, was the field director of STR in 2014, when the proposal was first mooted.

## What changes

The STR, one of the first nine tiger reserves that came into being following the launch of Project Tiger in 1973, now covers more than 2,500sqkm. It comprises the Sundarbans National Park (East and West), the Sajnekhali Wildlife Sanctuary and the Basirhat Range.

The tiger habitat in the South 24-Parganas division includes the Matla, Raidighi and Ramganga ranges, measuring around 1,100sqkm.

The three other ranges — Diamond Harbour, Namkhana and Kultali — do not have tigers, said forest officials.

“Post-merger, STR will include Matla, Raidighi and Ramganga. The STR will now cover an area of over 3,600sqkm. More importantly, the entire tiger landscape of south Bengal will come under a unified administrative control,” a forest official in Bengal said.

The last quadrennial national tiger census was published in 2023. The report estimated that there were 101 tigers in the Sundarbans.