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Kerala Forest Department Moves to Remove Illegal Geotagging of Sensitive Forest Locations to Protect Ecology and Public Safety

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Recent Developments:

- The **Kerala Forest Department** has decided to identify and remove **illegally geotagged locations** within the State's forests from online mapping platforms to protect **human lives, wildlife and ecologically fragile areas**.
- The decision follows growing concerns that publicly available geotags are encouraging **unauthorised entry** into **protected forests, wildlife habitats and ecologically sensitive zones**, thereby increasing environmental and safety risks.
- The department has directed its **Information Technology (IT) Wing** to identify such locations and coordinate with online mapping platforms for their removal, while also initiating legal action against violators wherever applicable.

Geotagging:

Meaning of Geotagging:

- **Geotagging** is the process of attaching **geographical information**, such as **latitude, longitude, altitude, date and time**, to digital content including **photographs, videos, social media posts and documents**.
- It enables the **precise geographical location** where the content was created or shared to be identified.
- Geotagging forms the foundation of several **Geographic Information System (GIS)** and **Location-Based Services (LBS)** applications.

Uses of Geotagging:

- Facilitates **navigation, location-based services** and digital mapping.
- Supports **disaster management, emergency response** and search-and-rescue operations.
- Assists **environmental monitoring, biodiversity conservation** and scientific research.
- Strengthens **land records, urban planning** and infrastructure management.
- Enhances **tourism, logistics** and asset tracking.
- Enables **location sharing** across social media platforms.

Concerns Associated with Geotagging:

- May violate **personal privacy** by revealing an individual's location.
- Increases the risk of **stalking, theft** and cybercrime.
- May expose **sensitive military, strategic** and security installations.
- Can be misused by **criminals, poachers, smugglers** or hostile actors for surveillance and unlawful activities.

What is Illegal Geotagging?:

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Meaning:

- **Illegal geotagging** refers to the **unauthorised capture, sharing or publication** of location-specific information that is prohibited by law or poses a threat to **national security, public safety, ecological conservation** or **individual privacy**.

Examples:

- Publicly marking **ecologically sensitive locations** inside **protected forests** without official approval.
- Geotagging **trekking routes** used by Forest Department personnel inside protected areas, including parts of **Silent Valley**, on online mapping platforms.
- Uploading geotagged photographs of **military installations, air bases, naval facilities** or other strategic infrastructure.
- Publishing the **precise location** of individuals without their consent in violation of privacy laws.
- Geotagging **critical infrastructure**, such as **nuclear power plants, ammunition depots** and communication facilities, where disclosure is legally restricted.

Legal Perspective in India:

Legal Framework:

- India does **not** have a standalone law that specifically prohibits **geotagging**.
- However, geotagging becomes unlawful when it violates provisions under:
 - **Official Secrets Act, 1923.**
 - **Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS), 2023**, wherever applicable.
 - **Digital Personal Data Protection Act, 2023.**
- Other **national security** and **public safety** regulations.
- Government authorities may also prohibit **photographing, mapping or publishing** the location of specified sensitive sites in the interest of security and conservation.

What Prompted the Move?:

Immediate Reasons:

- The **Kerala Government** observed that geotagged locations inside protected forests were directing visitors towards places where entry could be dangerous while simultaneously disturbing fragile ecosystems.
- Forest officials expressed concern over the increasing number of **ecologically sensitive locations** appearing on digital mapping platforms.
- The **Kozhikode Divisional Forest Officer** had earlier sought the removal of **Google Maps** listings inside reserve forests after observing that such listings encouraged **unauthorised public entry**.

Identification and Removal Process:

Departmental Action Plan:

- The **IT Wing** of the Forest Department has been entrusted with identifying all illegally geotagged locations.
- A verified list will be prepared and forwarded to the **Forest Management Wing**.
- The final list will be submitted to **online mapping platforms** with a request to remove the identified geotags.
- The department also plans to identify individuals responsible for uploading such geotags inside **reserve forests** and **protected areas** and initiate legal proceedings wherever necessary.

Why is Illegal Geotagging a Concern?:

Disaster Risk:

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- Many illegally geotagged locations are situated in **mountainous regions** prone to **landslides** and other natural hazards, particularly during the **monsoon season**.
- Tourists visiting Kerala to experience the **monsoon landscape** are increasingly entering these hazardous areas without authorisation.

Wildlife and Ecological Risk:

- Public disclosure of **wildlife corridors** increases the risk of **human–wildlife conflict**, particularly in habitats inhabited by **elephants, big cats** and **gaur (Indian bison)**.
- Unregulated human access disturbs breeding habitats, damages fragile ecosystems and facilitates illegal activities such as **poaching, wildlife trafficking** and timber smuggling.
- Forest authorities have emphasised that the **ecological sanctity** of protected areas must be preserved and that unauthorised tourism cannot be permitted.

Additional Measures Planned:

Future Strategy:

- Forest teams have been instructed to engage with **human habitations** located near ecologically sensitive areas.
- The department is coordinating with **local self-government institutions** to establish a regulatory mechanism preventing illegal entry and future unauthorised geotagging.
- Environmental organisations have urged authorities to strengthen monitoring of **digital platforms**, remove unauthorised map pins and regulate access to protected forests through stricter enforcement measures.

Related UPSC Concepts:

Geographic Information System (GIS):

- **GIS** is a computer-based system used to **capture, store, analyse, manage** and visualise geographically referenced data.
- GIS supports **disaster management, environmental conservation, urban planning** and natural resource management.

Location-Based Services (LBS):

- **LBS** provide services based on the real-time geographical location of users using **GPS, mobile networks** and digital mapping technologies.
- Common applications include **navigation, emergency services, fleet management** and location-based commerce.

Digital Personal Data Protection Act, 2023:

- The Act regulates the **processing of digital personal data** while recognising the rights of individuals over their personal information.
- Unauthorised disclosure of **location data** may attract legal consequences where it amounts to misuse of personal data.

Protected Areas in India:

- Protected Areas include **National Parks, Wildlife Sanctuaries, Conservation Reserves** and **Community Reserves** notified under the **Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972**.
- Human activities inside these areas are regulated to conserve **biodiversity** and maintain ecological balance.

Conclusion:

- Kerala's initiative highlights an emerging governance challenge at the intersection of **digital technology, environmental conservation** and **public safety**.
- Regulating illegal geotagging through **platform-level cooperation, legal enforcement** and community participation can strengthen the protection of ecologically sensitive landscapes while reducing risks to human lives and wildlife.

Value Addition for UPSC:

Quick Revision Facts:

- **Geotagging:** Attaching geographical coordinates to digital content.
- **Core Components:** Latitude, Longitude, Altitude, Date, Time.
- **Major Technologies Used:** GPS, GIS, Remote Sensing, Location-Based Services (LBS).
- **Important Laws:** Official Secrets Act, 1923, Digital Personal Data Protection Act, 2023, Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, 2023 (where applicable).
- **Major Risks:** Privacy violations, Human–Wildlife Conflict, Poaching, Cybercrime, National Security Threats.
- **Protected Areas are governed primarily under:** Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972 and relevant Forest Acts