

# Odisha hopeful of world heritage tag for Bhitarkanika National Park

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The Odisha government is hopeful of getting the Bhitarkanika National Park, the country's second largest mangrove forest after the Sundarbans in neighbouring West Bengal, included in the list of Unesco World Heritage Sites.



“A meeting of the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) would be held in Europe in May or June to discuss on according approval to Bhitarkanika National Park,” Sidhant Das, Principal Chief Conservator of Forests (Wildlife), told IANS.

An IUCN team had visited the national park, located in Kendrapara district, last November. IUCN makes recommendations on whether a site should be included in the World Heritage List or not.

“We have already submitted a dossier on Bhitarkanika that contains ground-level information on biodiversity, the ecosystem, human habitation and socio-economic condition of local residents and their dependence on forest produce. During their visit, the team was also apprised of the rich biodiversity of the sanctuary,” said Das.

IUCN is reviewing nine World Heritage nominations with natural criteria, including two extensions and seven new sites, which are proposed for 2017.

“The IUCN World Heritage Panel gathered in December in Gland, Switzerland, to consider the proposals as part of a rigorous evaluation process which will conclude in April,” said a recent post on the IUCN website.

IUCN makes recommendations to the World Heritage Committee, which takes the final call during its annual session in July.

The 41st World Heritage Committee meeting will take place in Krakow, Poland, July 2-12, according to the website.

Bhitarkanika is also a Ramsar wetland site, having been declared so in 2002. The park figured on the tentative list of future heritage sites of Unesco in 2009 and made its way to the final list in 2014.

Earlier, in 1984, Unesco had declared the Sun Temple at Konark a World Heritage Site.

The Bhitarkanika sanctuary was declared a protected forest in 1961, with 672 km of its area declared a wildlife sanctuary in 1975 and its core area of 145 km declared a National Park in 1998.

“We hope Bhitarkanika gets the world heritage tag soon. This will enable the

park to get more funding from the government and international agencies. It will also attract more tourists,” said Bimal Prasanna Acharya, Divisional Forest officer, Rajnagar Mangrove (Wildlife) Forest Division.

The forest has more than 300 plant species of about 80 families, including 94 species of mangroves and associates of 28 families. It has other unique features like the largest number of saltwater estuarine crocodiles in the world, 300 species of indigenous and migratory birds and mass nesting of Olive Ridley turtles.

It has also 24 species of crabs and two species of horseshoe crabs. A community management system and participation of the people in the development of the area are other important features of the site. (IANS)