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# Flood of approvals by wildlife board sets the stage for a crisis

*Niranjan Kaggere, DHNS, Bengaluru, May 31 2020, 01:08 ist updated: Jun 05 2020, 23:40 ist*

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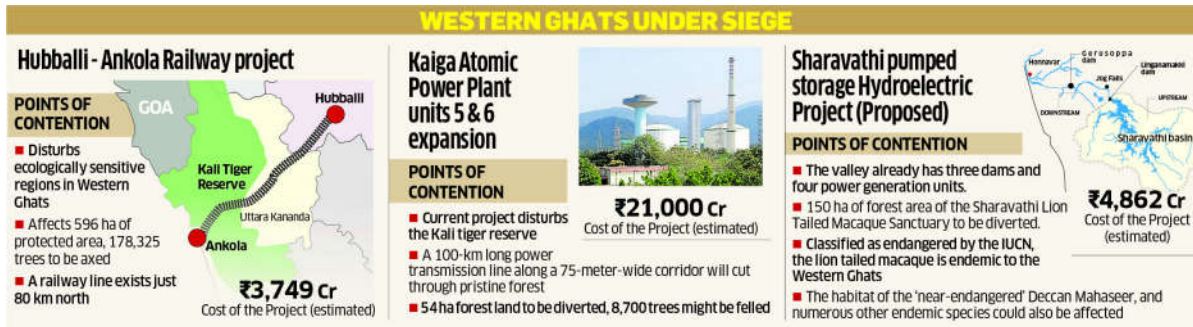
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During the nation-wide lockdown, most government departments, barring the essential services, had deferred taking decisions on issues of public interest. But this nation-wide inactivity has seemingly come as a shot in the arm for the Union Ministry of Environment, Forests and Climate Change (MoEF&CC), which used this opportunity to bypass public opinion and surreptitiously approve some long-pending 'developmental' projects inside the protected areas of the country.

In a move that clears the air about its priorities and marks a paradigm shift in the country's conservation history, the National Board for Wildlife (NBWL), set a new precedent by according permission to more than 30 projects via video conference in the first week of April. The NBWL, which was created to safeguard the biodiversity of the country, should have been an exemplary model in conservation during this hour of climate change. In its hurried, virtual clearance of the project during the lockdown, it has delivered the opposite of what was expected from it.

**Read:** [Northeast up in arms against projects in eco-sensitive zones](#)

In its recent meetings, the Board cleared several projects located deep inside fragile ecosystems and bio-diversity hotspots like the Western Ghats, seemingly holding meetings to clear development projects rather than deliberate their impact on the environment.



“When the decision makers thrust their agenda—loot as much as you can while at power — during face-to-face meetings despite the dissenting voice of subject experts, what best can you expect out of a virtual meeting,” questioned Dr T V Ramachandra of Centre for Ecological Sciences at Indian Institute of Science, Bengaluru.

“NBWL clearance process should not be completed as a mere formality. Our Protected Areas (PAs) are the country’s last remaining wildlife habitats, so granting clearance to any project proposed inside the PAs should be the last resort. If the Standing Committee of National Board for Wildlife (SC-NBWL) is seriously screening these project proposals, 40% of total proposals put up in every meeting requires site inspection. I do not think it is possible through video-conferencing,” said Kishor Rithe, a former member of the SC-NBWL.

Each of the 30 plus projects accorded permission or discussed by the MoEF&CC in April would have long lasting impact on the environment. Those projects located in the eco-sensitive Western Ghats, will have a far greater impact on the region’s ecosystem.

**Also Read:** [Wildlife Board an active agent in environmental](#)

[destruction](#)


In particular, the NBWL’s ‘In principal approval’ to the Karnataka Power Corporation Limited (KPCL) to undertake the geotechnical survey inside the Sharavathi Lion Tailed Macaque Sanctuary is widely seen as an invitation to catastrophe in Shivamogga district, where people have unsuccessfully fought against several such ‘developmental projects’ in the past.

“Be it Sharavathi valley or any other part in the district, there is nothing left to tamper with. In fact, the district has enough projects, more projects than its actual carrying capacity,” rued Akhilesh Chipli, a farmer and activist from Sagara in Shivamogga. A naturalist from the region alleged that what was declared a protected area in 2017 has been undone in 2018, only to allow this project.

Meantime, soon after clearing the projects, the MoEF is waking up to the effects of the Coronavirus pandemic. The ministry has instructed states not to allow movement of people into wildlife sanctuaries and national line parks and initiate steps to prevent spread of the Covid-19 from humans to animals and vice versa.

**Recent Wildlife Board approvals include**

- 1 **ASSAM, DEHING PATKAI ELEPHANT RESERVE** Purpose: Coal mining
- 2 **GOA, XELDEM** Purpose: Power transmission line
- 3 **MIZORAM, DAMPA TIGER RESERVE** Purpose: Road widening
- 4 **GUJARAT, GIRNAR WILDLIFE SANCTUARY** Purpose: Underground electric line
- 5 **TELANGANA, MANCHERIAL DISTRICT** Purpose: Railway line
- 6 **UTTARAKHAND DEHRADUN, TEHRI GARHWAL DISTRICT** Purpose: Dam construction
- 7 **RAJASTHAN, MUKUNDRA TIGER RESERVE, KOTA** Purpose: Limestone and Masonry mining



**Wildlife Clearance in Karnataka**

Year	Proposals	Pending with SG/MoEFFC	Disposed (Approved)
2015	4	0	0
2016	46	0	14
2017	23	1	1
2018	32	0	6
2019	38	4	0

**DISEASE OUTBREAKS LINKED TO ECOLOGICAL DESTRUCTION**

**MOSQUITOES**  
(Deforestation leads to increased breeding of mosquitoes)

1. Malaria
2. Dengue
3. Chikungunya
4. Zika virus

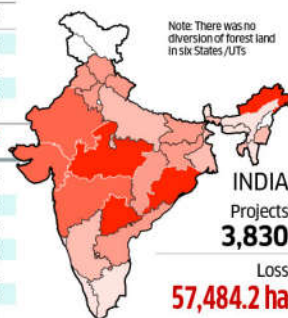
**ZOOBOTIC DISEASES**

1. Nipah Virus
2. Leptospirosis
3. Kyasanur Forest disease

Forest clearance for various projects from 2015-2020

### Forest Clearance for various projects from 2016-2020 IN KARNATAKA

Year	Projects	Loss (in ha)
2016-17	20	199.20
2017-18	15	320.71
2018-19	7	140.64
2019-20	15	202.67
<b>Total</b>	<b>57</b>	<b>863.2</b>



#### States with Highest and Lowest forest clearances

Madhya Pradesh	458	9,234.53
Odisha	64	9,982.9
Arunachal Pradesh	9	4,983.09
Telangana	49	7,571.21
Kerala	9	7.48
Tamil Nadu	14	70.81

### Loss of trees in the last decade

**23.07 m**  
IN KARNATAKA

**382.22 m**  
IN INDIA



### Animal-Human conflict in Karnataka 2016-2019

60,240 cases Reported

₹36.23 Crore Compensation



### NOT SO GREEN

**2015**  
NDA govt exempts 32 industries from receiving wildlife clearance - Requirements for forest clearances relaxed for linear projects (roads, railways, transmission lines)

**2018**  
India ranks 177 out of 180 countries in the Environment Performance index

**2019**  
Time to obtain environment clearance reduced from 600 days to 108 days.

### WILDLIFE BOARD CLEARANCES

**519**  
Number of proposals

**1.1%**  
proposals rejected by the NDA (June 2014-2019)

**260**  
Number of proposals

**11.9%**  
proposals rejected by the UPA (2009-May 2014)

SOURCE: KARNATAKA FOREST DEPARTMENT ANNUAL REPORT: 2016 - 2019, CENTRE FOR SCIENCE AND ENVIRONMENT REPORT, LOK SABHA QUESTIONS TO MINISTRY OF ENVIRONMENT, FOREST AND CLIMATE CHANGE, PARIVESH PORTAL, MINUTES OF MEETING OF 57TH MEETING OF NBWL

COMPILED BY: PRAJWAL SUVARNA  
DH GRAPHICS: RAMU M

Interestingly, Shivamogga has emerged as the centre of a dreaded zoonotic disease, the Kyasanur Forest Disease (KFD), with a fatality rate ranging from 3 to 10 per cent. There is a fear that a proposal to set up projects like pumped storage deep inside the forest might yet again result in an outbreak of infectious diseases.

Pointing at the possibility of such a scenario, Ramachandra said, "Removal of native species of vegetation and forestation with exotic monoculture like acacia, eucalyptus and teak has deprived the dependent population (monkey) of their food, forcing them to enter human habitations. This has brought diseases like KFD (a viral infection) into human colonies. Nipah virus is also linked to changes in ecological conditions that have led to fruit bats coming out of their natural habitat and feeding on agricultural produce consumed by humans."

Forest ecology and ecosystem management expert Dr M D Subash Chandran, who has studied this region extensively, says, "Even a small intervention will have irreversible damage to one of the last remains of the primary forests and disturb the habitats of numerous

endemic species, including the myristica swamps and the lion tailed macaque.”

However, the project proponent KPCL clarified that there will not be any greater disturbances, as the project is taken up underground. “This project is crucial for grid balancing, particularly to manage the less predictable renewable energy. Considering the terrain and the available infrastructure, there is no alternative to this site. The environmental assessment will be done if the survey results are favourable, and to my understanding the ecological impact will be negligible as the entire project will be undertaken underground and we don’t need any new structures,” KPCL Managing Director V Ponnuraj told DH.

### **Deliberate push**

Karnataka’s deliberate push for the controversial Hubballi-Ankola railway project, despite repeated rejection by several statutory bodies, raises doubts over the role of vested interests in the project. In fact, the project was cleared by the board in the absence of several members just based on recommendation of ‘special invitees’. Even though the project was conceived with an aim of providing transport facility to the iron ore, members of the state board with a background in the mining industry, including forest minister Anand Singh, had conveyed not to recommend the project.

Supporting their claim, a cost-benefit analysis done by the user agency for a period of over 30-years has revealed negative revenue for passenger service besides suggesting no significant revenue in freight operations. Considering the revenue possibilities, there are both rail and road alternatives to the project.

If the rail network does not serve the purpose, the existing Hubballi-

Ankola-Karwar National Highway-52 (Old NH-63) which runs almost parallel to the proposed railway alignment underutilised, according to the observations of many statutory authorities.

### **Other projects**

Little up the Ghats from the Sharavathi Valley, NBWL's previous permission in January 2020 to take up doubling of the existing railway line from Castlerock to Kulem and Kulem to Madgaon in neighbouring Goa and widening of road along the Karnataka border may also end up impacting the wildlife and their habitat in the region. "The doubling project's alignment from Tinaighat to Castlerock falls within Karnataka and the state had also submitted a proposal for clearance. Despite the Regional Empowered Committee resolving to consider the project by both the states as a whole, the standing committee of NBWL in a hurried manner cleared the proposals of Goa," explained an activist from Goa.

Coming out strongly against the new normal of according virtual clearances devoid of proper site inspection and investigation, former member of the NBWL Praveen Bhargav said, "The Apex Court's ruling in the Lafarge Judgment insisted that in case of any doubts on the status of land made by the user agency, it shall be inspected by forest officials along with the members from the ministry to ascertain the status of forests. But during the lockdown, this may not be possible. Hence these 30 plus proposals must not be implemented and considered afresh after the end of the pandemic."

The decisions at the State Board for Wildlife are no different. Sanjay Gubbi, a senior member of the Karnataka Wildlife Board, said, "Some projects that have serious ecological consequences

are cleared without providing any opportunity for field inspection. Two recent examples are the Hubballi-Ankola railway line and the Sharavathi pumped storage project. When it comes to the State Board for Wildlife, members are not even given adequate meeting notice to study the documents to be well prepared with reasonable arguments.”

Gubbi also noted that the board is now becoming a medium to get project clearances, while its duty is to advise the government in selection and management of protected areas, policy formulation for the conservation of wildlife, and harmonising the needs of forest dwellers and conservation of wildlife.

Well-known activist S R Hiremath raises concern about the lack of participatory approach while planning and executing conservation projects making them unsustainable. “Nature can never be managed well until people close to it are involved in its management and a healthy relationship is established between nature, society and culture.”

Subash Chandran sums it up, “The emphasis today should be on restructuring economy with least disturbance to pristine ecosystems.”

*(With inputs from Anitha Pailoor and Mrityunjay Bose)*