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# Karnataka government okays rail line in the Western Ghats

*Sandhya Sekar*

11-13 minutes

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- *About 2.2 lakh trees in the Western Ghats are to be felled to lay a railway line between Hubballi and Ankola.*
- *The state wildlife board had earlier approved an alternative rail route, which needed felling trees in only six-seven hectares, but the government had cancelled that proposal.*
- *Experts predict that the loss of vegetation in the ecologically sensitive region will lead to a host of problems such as erratic rainfall, soil erosion, drying up of water sources, etc.*
- *The rail line will also shrink the habitat of tigers and Asiatic elephants, restrict their movement and cause an increase in human-animal conflict.*

On March 20, the controversial Hubballi-Ankola railway line project was cleared at the Karnataka State Wildlife Board (KSWB) meeting in Bengaluru amid protests from members.

The proposed 164.44 km Hubballi-Ankola railway line passes through the Western Ghats, a United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) World Heritage Site. The project will see felling of 2.2 lakh trees, a move that has been

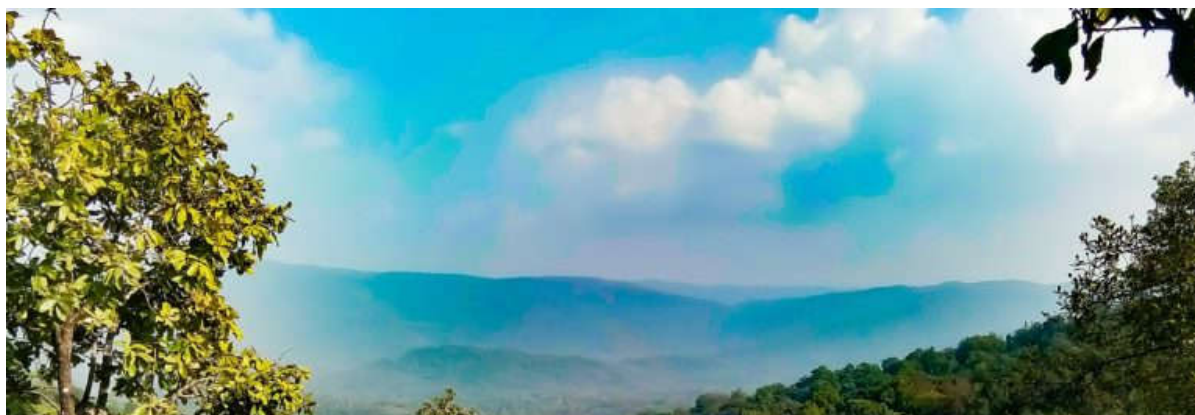
opposed even by the members of the KSWB.

According to a site inspection report submitted to the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEFCC), nearly 80% of the proposed railway line passes through the dense forest lands. The total land required is 995.64 hectares, including 595.64 hectares of forest land, 184.6 hectares of wetland, and 190 hectares of dry land, says the report.

Sanjay Mohan, the Principal Chief Conservator of Forests with Karnataka forest department and a member of the KSWB, told Mongabay-India that the people of North Karnataka want development and jobs in their area, and this project will ensure both.

This railway line was primarily planned to serve the freight traffic and to link the west coast to the Karnataka hinterland for socio-economic development of northern and Hyderabad-Karnataka region as the present mode of road transport is seasonal and is inaccessible for five months during monsoons.

As per the project layout, the main reason for proposing a new broad-gauge line was for the transportation of iron and manganese ore from Bellary to Hospet region to the upcoming ports at Tadri (near Ankola) and Karwar on the western coast of Karnataka, and also to the existing ports of Vasco and Madgaon in Goa.





View of the Western Ghats from Achave near Sirsi in Ankola taluk.

[Photo](#) by Deepak (Dh4445666)/Wikimedia Commons.

Though covering an area of 1.8 lakh square kilometres—or just under 6% of the total land area in India—the Western Ghats contains more than 30% of all plant, fish, bird, and mammal species found in the country. The Western Ghats, apart from being a storehouse of tropical biodiversity, is also the source of 38 east-flowing rivers and 27 rivers flowing into the Arabian Sea. The Godavari, Krishna, Mandovi, Cauvery and Zuari are some prominent rivers that originate in the Western Ghats.

Approximately [24.5 crore people](#) living in the peninsular Indian states receive most of their water supply from rivers originating in the Western Ghats.

Vijay Nishanth, biodiversity management committee member of the Bruhat Bengaluru Mahanagara Palike Forest Cell, highlighted that the area is among the biodiversity hotspots in the world as it houses about 2,500 endemic species of plants, insects, animals and amphibians.

If a part of the area is used for development, many of the endemic species will go extinct, he added.

## **Severe impact**

The project is set to affect the vegetation, faunal diversity and animal movement in the Western Ghats. The proposed railway line passes through different types of forests, including evergreen, semi-evergreen, moist deciduous and dry deciduous with a dense canopy.

The project is a “complete hoax and professional fraud”, according to a former Chief Wildlife Warden (CWW) with the Karnataka forest department.

Requesting anonymity, the ex-CWW added that apart from the loss of vegetation, the project will also affect rainfall. The forests release tiny particles which seed clouds and induce rainfall due to which the top ridges receive 4,000-6,000 mm of rainfall. On account of good vegetation cover, there’s good organic matter in the soil, and it helps in the percolation of water, he informed.

The water comes out at lower ridges in the form of springs even several months after the rains stop, leading to the availability of water even during dry periods, he explained.

The destruction of vegetation in the Western Ghats will lead to erratic rainfall, no scope for rainwater to percolate into the soil, and hence the water will rush downstream at high-speed, taking away the soil along with it, he highlighted.

“In this way, the Western Ghats start getting destroyed and the eroded soil deposits in lakes and rivers, which will reduce their capacity to hold water. Either there will be a flood or a drought, as we have already witnessed in 2018 and 2019. All this can lead to a reduction in crop yields and subsequent food shortage,” he stated.

In its report to the state government, the Indian Institute of Science (IISc) had stated that a frog species that had gone extinct was

rediscovered on the proposed railway stretch. The IISc still gave a green signal to the project, suggesting measures to minimise damage to biodiversity.

Such rediscovered species will be in very limited numbers and with the implementation of this project, this species is definitely going to become extinct, Vijay Nishanth highlighted.

Nishanth also added that there are many other species in the Western Ghats that have medicinal, industrial and food value. They play an important role in the ecosystem and there is a need to preserve them by not implementing the project, he mentioned.

The lead author of the IISc study, TV Ramachandra, a scientist with the Centre for Ecological Sciences, Indian Institute of Science, Bengaluru, said the project would have a severe impact on the ecology of Western Ghats.

He said that in the 168-km railway line area, anthropogenic factors had already reduced the forest cover from 98.78% in 1973 to 83.14% in 2010. If that land is used for railway track, the forest cover will reduce by further 16.23% and every species of tree and shrubs from the floristic study will be hugely affected.

Further, in the faunal diversity study of the area, Dr Ramachandra confirmed the presence of 29 species of mammals, 256 species of birds, eight species of reptiles and 50 species of butterflies that feature in the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Red List. Most of these species are protected under the Wildlife Protection Act, 1972. Ramachandra said the entire faunal diversity is endangered by this project.

He added that if the railway line is constructed, there is a 96% chance of landslides in north Karnataka. He further informed that

the project would induce a loss of nearly 2.5 lakh ton of carbon removal due to the loss of vegetation.

Another [report](#) by Ramachandra's research group states that further deforestation of the Western Ghats will trigger higher instances of flooding and drought.

On August 12, 2017, the MoEFCC stated that while there are about 50 tiger reserves in the country, Kali Tiger Reserve and the Western Ghats constitute the best of the habitats for tigers and elephants.



The Kali river from Ankola. [Photo](#) by India Water Portal/Flickr.

The ex-CWW highlighted that the proposed railway line would shrink their habitat, take away their homes and will cut the movement of elephants and tigers, which will lead to more instances of man-animal conflict.

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Read more: [Third train track in Palamu reserve could derail seasonal elephant movement](#)

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The ex-CWW mentioned that no one is ready to analyse the past and the present decade's accelerated climatic changes, which have resulted in a series of ecologically and environmentally disastrous events across the globe. The ecological repercussions of this project would be severe, he cautioned.

## **Alternative, past attempts for the railway line**

The Railways ministry had proposed laying a broad-gauge line on the Hubballi-Ankola route in the railway budget of 1997-98. Resistance from ecologists kept the project from realisation. In 2011, Karnataka government asked the IISc to look into the concerns and present a report. The report, published in 2011, said the project could go ahead with certain adjustments to minimise damage to flora and fauna. The state government chose to go ahead with this report instead of the findings of two other committees—set up by the National Board for Wildlife—which recommended scrapping the project altogether.

In 2017, the Karnataka government had recommended the proposal to the MoEFCC based on the IISc report, where it recommended the implementation of the project with suggested improvements. However, in 2018, the National Board for Wildlife introduced two committees comprising the Inspector General of Forests, Wildlife Division of MoEFCC, Wildlife Institute of India, National Tiger Conservation Authority.

The committees rejected the project in its entirety, considering its wider ecological ramifications on the fragile Western Ghats and its impacts on the endangered species. In one of their reports, the committees said, "It is reiterated that extremely fragile ecosystems

of the Western Ghats will not be able to sustain or buffer impacts likely caused by a developmental project of the scale of Hubballi-Ankola railway track construction.”

Requesting anonymity, a highly placed KSWB member told Mongabay-India that every department had been opposed to the project from day one. He informed that on March 9, the KSWB had met to discuss two options: the Hubballi-Ankola railway line and the Hubballi-Madgaon railway line. The latter, too, provides rail connectivity to Ankola but takes an hour and a half longer than the Hubballi-Ankola line.

The official informed that they had given wildlife clearance to the Hubballi-Madgaon railway line in the March 9 meeting to save the Western Ghats. This project would have required the felling of trees only on six or seven hectares. The official said Karnataka Chief Minister BS Yediyurappa, too, had accepted the proposal but had to reverse the decision within a fortnight, reportedly because of political pressure.

After the meeting on March 20, the day the Karnataka government gave a green signal to the controversial railway line, Jayanagar MLA Sowmya Reddy resigned as a member of the KSWB. She took to [Facebook](#), where she mentioned that the project would have a severe impact on the environment and wildlife.

“I am not against development, but I cannot support something that is harmful to the environment where there was an alternative, my conscience will not allow me to. Natural disasters in the recent past have shown us that nothing is bigger than preserving the exciting nature,” she said.

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**Banner image:** A view of the Kali river from Dandeli. [Photo](#) by Abhishek Baadkar/Pixabay.

