

Karnataka: No Hubballi-Ankola railway line through elephant corridor in Western Ghats

Bangalore Mirror Bureau | Updated: Sep 28, 2018, 09:16 IST



elephant

By Yogesh Naik

National Board of Wildlife rejects use of forest land for 1.68m Hubballi-Ankola Broad Gauge railway line; saves Ghats' biodiversity

This is good news for environmentalists and for anyone who cares about the biodiversity in Western Ghats.

After many years of deliberations, the standing committee of the National Board of Wildlife (NBW), rejected the diversion of 595.64 hectares of forest land in Karwar, Yellapura and Dharwad Division for the construction of the new Broad Gauge Hubballi-Ankola railway line.

The minutes of the meeting held earlier this month were issued on September 26, bringing to end speculation that the railway line would destroy over two lakh trees and involve diversion of 595.64 ha of cumulative forest land. This includes 42.0 ha from Dharwad Elephant Corridor, 304.06 ha from Yellapura Elephant Corridor and 249.58 ha from Kanwar Elephant corridor, said the Inspector General of Forests Wildlife (IGF (WL)), briefing the standing committee of NBW.

The Hubballi-Ankola railway line has been under controversy ever since it was envisaged in 1998 to transport mineral ore from the mining districts of Karnataka to various ports along the coast. The National Green Tribunal (NGT) in February 2016 had directed the Railways— the user agency, to approach the State Government for diversion of land and convert it for non-forest activities.

The IGF (WL) added that the State wildlife authorities of Karnataka had recommended the proposal with the condition that mitigation measures suggested by the Indian Institute of Science Bengaluru be implemented.

However, the Site Inspection Committee of National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA) had rejected the project since it passes through the Western Ghats, a biodiversity hotspot and a world heritage site. The project would have also fragmented the old migration path of Indian elephants. Out of the six tiger-occupied landscapes of India, currently the Western Ghats possesses the best habitat connectivity and contiguity. Recent research has highlighted that the future of tigers in India depends on conserving the habitat connectivity of isolated tiger population of tiger reserves.

Objections through the years

Environmental activists have been angry with the Karnataka Forest Department (KFD) for losing forest land to developmental projects in the last few years. Spurred by this, KFD took a hard stand on the proposed project. To safeguard 595 hectares of forest land between Dharwad and Ankola, KFD suggested tunnelling instead of axing over 2 lakh trees.

Acknowledging the damage that could be caused by the railway line and the inspection by the KFD officials, the Regional Empowered Committee (REC) of Regional Office of MoEF sent the Hubballi-Ankola Railway project proposal back to the state government for reconsideration.

Controversial project

Initially, the Supreme Court-appointed Central Empowered Committee (CEC) had recommended scrapping of the project.

Soon after the NGT's directions, the State government in October 2016, submitted a proposal to divert the 595.64 hectares in favour of the Railways and furnished RoFR compliance certificates from the revenue departments. Taking up the proposal, the REC constituted a committee comprising both retired and serving IFS officers to carry out site inspection and submit a report over the feasibility.

Based on the report that strongly disapproved of the project, REC directed the Karnataka government and Railways to submit current objectives of the project, cost benefit analysis, exact count of trees, compensatory afforestation and other aspects.

Since over two lakh trees had to be felled, the REC had asked for an Environmental Impact Assessment for the project to be conducted.

The Railways had proposed 34 tunnels and nine stations, most of which would have come up in the forest area. This would further have required forest land to build approach roads. And all this for just 1.68 m of railway line.

In the 48th meeting held on March 27, 2017, the Standing Committee decided that a committee comprising one representative each of Wildlife Institute of India, NTCA and Wildlife Division would

visit the proposed site and submit a report to the Ministry of Environment, Forests (MoEF) within thirty days. In the follow-up, Ministry of Railways were told to pursue the matter with SBWL.

