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Gundia project will wipe out rare species

Ronald Anil Fernandes, Mangalore, Sep 19, DHNS:

A detailed study prepared by Wildlife Matters Trust, a Bangalore-based NGO has observed that the Gundia Hydro Electric Power Project deplete the natural resources and also wipe out many flagship species of flora and fauna.



A memorandum was submitted to Western Ghats Ecology Experts Panel Chairman Prof Madhav Gadgil, requesting him to deny environmental clearance to the controversial Gundia Hydro Electric Power Project.

The report stated that if the GHEP goes ahead, nearly 6,000 hectares of forests would be destroyed and the loss of such a large tract of forest would spell death for various species of flora and fauna

which includes many critically and endangered species.

Stating that the Western Ghats in Karnataka have already been subjected to massive abuse in the name of various so-called 'developmental projects,' it said most of the hydro electric projects of the state (about 3,000 MW out of a total of about 3,500 MW) are in the Western Ghats.

Noting that the destruction, submersion and fragmentation of the Western Ghats due to hydel projects alone have been so massive that its sensitive ecology has been irreversibly damaged, the study states that the proposed building of the GHEP will increase threat from human interference, deforestation, developmental projects and habitat fragmentation.

Threat to animal species

The GHEP area is covered on all sides by protected areas such as Pushpagiri, Brahmagiri and Kudremukh sanctuaries and if the animal corridors are blocked, the man-animal conflict will increase.

The GHEP area, also known as Malnad-Kodagu corridor in Western Ghats has Asian elephants, tigers, Asiatic wild dogs, greater spotted eagles, white backed vulture and the long billed vulture among many other endangered animal species.

"The conservation of these species cannot depend upon a site-based approach alone and requires the protection of larger landscape, hence the need to keep this area as continuous as possible," the report states.

The corridor covers an area of about 21,345 square kilometres (11.9 per cent of the total Western Ghats area), making it the largest corridor in the Western Ghats, the report stated. Quoting experts, the report states that the Western Ghats are one of the most important carbon sinks in the world for reducing emissions and global warming and are critically important for wildlife survival as much as they are for humans.

Objections

Interestingly, the report has also listed the objections point by point and para by para to comprehensive environmental impact assessment (CEIA) and environmental management plan (EMP) for GHEP submitted to KPCL by the Environment Consultant Institute for Catchment Studies & Environmental Management (ICSEM).

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Terming the CEIA as highly biased in favour of implementation of the project and to mislead the government and the public, the memorandum demanded that the CEIA should be done by highly reputed and premier scientific institutes like IISc.

The project

The Gundia Hydel Power Project, proposed by Karnataka Power Corporation Limited (KPCL), and located in Sakleshpur taluk of Hassan district and Puttur taluk of Dakshina Kannada district, involves construction of three weirs and two dams — a weir of 15 m height across the Yettinahole, eight m high weir across the Kerihole, 36 m high weir across the Hongadahalla and 62 m high dam across the Bettakumeri stream.

These reservoirs are proposed to be connected by interconnecting tunnels which lead water to Bettakumeri reservoir and then on to turbines at Gundia underground power house at Horibetta, about 8 kms from the Gundia checkpost.

Survey works on?

Though Union Minister for Environment and Forests Jairam Ramesh too had opposed the project, Chief Minister B S Yeddyurappa laid the foundation stone for the first unit (200 MW) of Gundya Hydel Power Project at Yettinahole, about 18 kms from Sakleshpur in Hassan district on May 24, 2009, amidst heavy police security owing to threat of protests from environmentalists.

Though officials say that no work has taken place after the foundation was laid, sources in the forest department say that the KPCL has been conducting survey works at the site. The 'marking stones' in the region including at Horibetta forest proves the point.



Endangered

Species at GHEP site as mentioned in the memorandum submitted by Wildlife Matters Trust:

- * Butterflies — 44 species with 2 endangered
- * Fish — Approximately 14 species with 2 endangered
- * Amphibians — Approximately 23 species with 1 critically endangered and 2 endangered
- * Reptiles — 12 species with 2 endemic to the Western Ghats
- * Birds — 29 species
- * Mammals — Approximately 19 species with 5 vulnerable and 1 endangered

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