

LAND(LESS)

Wildlife Board Cleared Development Projects on 1,792 Hectares of Protected Areas in 2020: Study

By Saumya Kalia

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pandemic, according to a [Times of India report](#). Out of the 82 proposals considered, 25 pertained to land usage within sanctuaries and national parks.

The breakup of the land was such: 1,040 hectares of land belonged to eco-sensitive areas; 158 hectares were part of national parks, sanctuaries, and conservation reserves; and 594 hectares from tiger reserves. This land was used for linear projects, defense, and infrastructural activities.

“[Linear projects](#)” refer to construction activities such as building of roads, transmission lines, railways, pipelines that are “linear” in nature. These land-disturbing activities are believed to be particularly destructive because “they fragment the entire landscape and interrupt movement range of animals,” LIFE said in its analysis. In other words, they reduce the habitat meant for wildlife and also alter the ecosystem’s capacity to preserve biodiversity.

A critical finding of the report pertained to the clearance mechanism for these projects. Project clearance is typically given after conducting site visits to the protected areas, which

is crucial for assessing the ecological make-up to sustain developmental activities. The 48 projects that were cleared during the pandemic came at a time when ground visits wer

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"While India stayed home during the lockdown, these protected areas were either being slowly unlocked or prepared to be unlocked for human activities and development projects," Mongabay noted in a [report](#) from last year. "A safe haven for biodiversity and wildlife, India's protected areas are losing to the environment ministry's clearance spree where coal mining, road construction, and other projects are being approved within these ecologically sensitive areas."

One such project was located at the Bhagwan Mahavir Wildlife Sanctuary and Mollem National Park in Goa. The SC-NBWL cleared three projects in [the protected corridor](#), sparking protests last year. Activists expressed concern that the lack of assessment impact reports on these linear projects, such as laying down power transmission lines, would threaten

several species in the eco-sensitive and the overall ecological integrity. "Tree cavity-nesting birds such as hornbills such as the great hornbill which is classified as vulnerable and

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Rajaji National Park in Uttarakhand have also sparked protests. Assam's Dehing Patkai has rare and endangered species which was also cleared for coal mining.

"The laying of the transmission line would need the felling of large old-growth trees along its course. These forests that have existed for thousands of years are irreplaceable. Direct loss of biodiversity and the far-reaching impacts of habitat fragmentation will reduce ecosystem stability and decrease forest resilience," the letter noted.

Recently, the government announced the issuance of guidelines for "[ecotourism](#)," wherein a list of protected areas will be used for "low-impact nature tourism." Activists have been wary of such a policy, arguing that the impact on land will still be severe. "An ecotourism policy should not create the justification to fragment ecologically sensitive habitats and extinguish existing use rights," Kanchi Kohli, legal researcher, Centre for Policy Research, [told Hindustan Times](#).

Notably, the protected areas are critical to preventing forest loss. The loss of small proportions – that otherwise sustain biodiversity – would be hard to compensate for. "At around 4.9% of India's geographical expanse, its protected areas – including national parks and wildlife sanctuaries – are anywa

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of degradation of nature and the consequences of opening up wildlife habitats for human activities,” Udayan Borthakur, an activist, told Mongabay.

It is reductive to tout this as a “conservation vs development” debate – the binary posits preservation efforts as mutually exclusive to societal needs for development and growth. The locus of the idea remains on how well we can safeguard our natural habitats and fold them into plans for the future.

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