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'Energy not at the cost of ecology'

Ronald Anil Fernandes, Hongadahalla (Gundia Project site, Hassan dist), DHNS :
Gundia Hydro Electric Project: Panel may recommend sustainable development

There is a need for energy security, but not at the cost of ecology and environment, said Dr G V Subramanyan, Advisor to Union Ministry of Environment and Forests (MoEF), after visiting Horibetta, Bettakumeri and Hongadahalla, the proposed sites for Gundia Hydro Electric Project (GHEP) to be constructed in Hassan and Dakshina Kannada districts, on Thursday.



In fact, the team's visit is the first in the series of visits to study Western Ghats region.

Terming the beauty of Western Ghats as unparalleled, he stressed the need to maintain balance between energy security and ecology.





Ghats Ecology Panel constituted by the MoEF to study the Western Ghats, he said the expert panel would assess, study and recommend for rejuvenation and to ensure sustainable development of Western Ghat region. The study would also help to demarcate the area to be notified as ecology-sensitive area based on scientific assessment.

March 2011 deadline

Speaking on the occasion, Western Ghats Ecology Expert Panel Chairman Prof Madhav Gadgil clarified that the panel is only an advisory body to make recommendations and a final decision on the Gundia project will be taken by the MoEF. The panel will submit its report by March 2011, he said.

Terming the proposed site of Gundia project as the "last remains of the original Western Ghats rain forest," Prof M D Subash Chandran, a scientist from IISc and Member of Biodiversity Board of Karnataka, said the project passes through very rich endemic land, where endangered animal species move around freely and the hill tops and many slopes having luxurious grass lands favourable for wildlife.

Interestingly, the panel members, during their very short visit to the dense forests in Horibetta, where the 7.8 km underground headrace tunnel and 3.1 km tailrace tunnel will pass through about 100 metres underground, could find several rare species of trees.

They include *Mesua Ferrea* (Naga Sampige), *Calophyllum Aomestosum* (Surhonne), *Elueocarpus* (Rudraksha), *Myristieg* (Rampatri), Tree ferns (*Cyathea*), *Pinanga dicksonii* (Kadadakke), *Dipterocarpus* (Gurjan) and many more.

Other experts in the team included panel member Vidya Nayak, Niraj Kathri and Amith (both deputy directors, MoEF), Bio Fuel Task Force Chairman Y B Ramakrishna, Western Ghats Task Force member Ranjan Rao Yaradoor and IISc Scientist Dr Harish Bhat.

Expert panel

It may be recalled that the MoEF had referred the Gundia hydel power project to the Western Ghats Ecology Expert panel, under the chairmanship of Prof Madhav Gadgil to look at the development and environmental issues in the context of the ecologically-significant, bio-diversity-rich and environmentally-sensitive Western Ghats region, on July 13, 2010.



The Expert Appraisal Committee (EAC) has considered this project thrice since 2008 and in its June 30, 2010 meeting in Delhi, finally decided to scrap the Hongadahalla dam from the scheme. Now, the total land requirement has decreased from 1,041 ha to 478.96 ha (private land 71.98 ha, forest land 113.22 ha and revenue land including river course is 293.76 ha).