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HC panel berates hydel plants in Western Ghats

Subhash Chandra N S Bangalore: Oct 25, 2012 DH News Service
Recommends withdrawal of forest clearance

The Elephant Task Force constituted by the High Court has recommended cancellation of the lease granted to mushrooming mini hydel power projects in the Western Ghats, particularly in Sakleshpur region.

Contrary to the contentions that there is not much forest cover in Sakleshpur region where some mini hydel power plants have been permitted, the report states that 65 per cent of the landscape is under forest cover and lies along the crest line of the Western Ghats.

The patch connects forests of Pushpagiri Wildlife Sanctuary in the south and Charmadi and Kudremukha National Park in the north.

Power plants as threats

The small population of elephants here faces severe threat due to construction of power plants, the report says.

The 13-member committee is headed by Prof Raman Sukumaran, Centre for Ecological Sciences, Indian Institute of Sciences, and comprises several elephant experts — a former official from Forest Department, Principal Chief Conservator of Forests and Chief Wildlife wardens from Karnataka, Tamil Nadu and Kerala — among others.

"The elephant population is not under threat from habitat loss here, even the non-natural elephant deaths are also relatively low, with none being reported in the last two years.

Possible degradation

"The major threats are: The construction of mini hydel projects, the possible degradation and progressive loss of habitat from illegal felling and possible loss of connectivity with habitats in the north," the report says.

Referring to the 200 MW Gundia hydel power project of Karnataka Power Corporation Limited, the panel has advocated the need to evaluate each project on a case-by-case basis.

The report notes that these projects involve multiple structures (weirs, penstocks, power house, access roads and transmission lines) at various locations in the forest.
The construction of these structures cause significant disturbance.

Once constructed, the penstocks and impounded water can create significant obstacles to the movement of wildlife, particularly elephants.

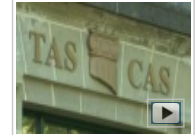
The report recommends prosecution of officials who ensured clearance for the projects.
The report goes on to mention the project taken up by Maruthi Power Gen.

"The concerned officials certified that the region contained no wildlife that is protected under Wildlife Protection Act - a clear misrepresentation given the presence of elephants, leopards and other wildlife in the surrounding forests."

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It says that in this case the central clearance process was avoided by disingenuously representing two turbines as two independent projects so as to slip in below the 25 MW threshold for clearance.

"From the available evidence the locations of these projects is at critical points of elephant movement, thereby if constructed they will significantly reduce the quality of elephant habitat," the committee says.

Recommendations

The committee report has recommended that the forest clearance given without attention to the substance of Forest Conservation Act must be withdrawn immediately and the officers involved in providing such clearance on the basis of misrepresentation of the biodiversity of the area must be prosecuted.

Besides, the committee has also stated that all applications seeking forest clearance to mini hydel power plants or quarry/ mining located in areas that fall within elephant conservation zone must be referred to the Chief Wildlife Warden for assessment of potential impact on elephants and other wildlife.

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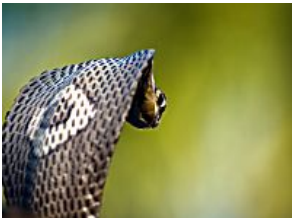
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