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Etalin hydel: Experts warn of biodiversity loss in Dibang Valley in letter to forest advisory panel

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Wildlife scientists and conservationists in Arunachal Pradesh flagged threats to local biodiversity from the proposed Etalin hydroelectric project in a letter to the Forest Advisory Committee (FAC) under the Union Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEF&CC).

FAC formed committees and ordered concerned bodies to submit reports on the impact of forest land diversion required for the project in the northeastern state's Dibang Valley. Based on these report, it will consider approving the project.

The Union power ministry and impact assessment division of MoEF&CC have given their nod for the project, according to the minutes of an FAC meeting released May 28, 2022.

The 3,097-megawatt hydroelectric project will require diversion of 1,165.66 hectares of forest land and felling of more than 280,000 trees in the area.

FAC, in its own deliberations dated 28 February 2017, had highlighted that the land in which the project is proposed covers two pristine forests with riverine growth that once cut cannot be replaced, the experts wrote in their letter.

An independent camera-trap-based study cited by the FAC Committee in 2014 had found that the community-managed forests that are interpreted as "degraded, and therefore of limited conservation value" hosted a much higher diversity of mammals than Dibang Wildlife Sanctuary, they added.

The four scientists Nandini Velho, Umesh Srinivasan, Anindya Sinha and Aparajita Datta pointed out that a four-month single-season biodiversity assessment survey by the Wildlife Institute of India (WII) found 21 mammal species and 230 bird species in the project study area at an elevation of 600-1,800 metres.

The letter mentioned:

Of the 16 range-restricted Eastern Himalayan species, six were found in the study area. WII's report clarifies that four of these habitat specialists were present along the Dri river, while all six species were found along Tangon river.

The eight-day rapid assessment survey was likely to be a serious underestimation, they warned. "The actual bird count within a 10-kilometre radius of the Etalin-Damro road is more likely to be closer to 300 species, including some rare ones like Blyth's Tragopan, Rufous-necked Hornbill, Ward's Trogon, Hodgson's Frogmouth, Beautiful Nuthatch, Wedge-billed Babbler, Mishmi-Wren-babbler, among others."

The letter added that since large areas under the Dibang valley are understudied, they still had the potential for discovery of new species.

As many as nine adult tigers were spotted using camera traps in the Dibang Valley during a three-year study, the experts highlighted. So, the presence of tigers in the area cannot be ruled out, they added.

The scientists urged FAC to conduct a cumulative assessment of the biodiversity impacts of multiple hydroelectric projects planned in the Dibang Basin, of which the 3,097-MW Etalin and 2,880-MW Dibang multipurpose projects are two of the biggest in the country.

The conservationists wrote in the letter:

The impacts of multiple projects on the same river limb must be assessed together because these impacts will be cumulative and not independent of one another. This also applies to the breaking up of the 3,097-MW Etalin and the 22-MW Anonpani projects as separate diversion proposals.

The Anonpani project is being built by the same developer, mainly to provide construction power for the Etalin project, they added. "Given that the forest land required for the Anonpani project is a part of the Etalin project, their impacts should be, once again, assessed jointly."

The biodiversity impacts of another proposed project – the 680MW Athunli Hydropower Project — located only a few kilometres upstream from these two projects on the same river — must also be considered jointly, according to the letter.

The factsheet of the project states that the 25 patches identified for compensatory afforestation of 1,841.32 hectares in the Dibang Valley have only been assessed through satellite imagery, the scientists flagged. It is still not clear whether the consent of the Gram Sabha has been obtained for it, they added.

“If there is no Gram Sabha consent, this would constitute non-compliance of the Forest (Rights) Act (FCA) 2006,” they wrote.

The scientists further pointed out that India is a signatory to the Convention of Biological Diversity and the Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species of Animals, along with being a founding member of Global Tiger Initiative. Destruction of habitat of the various migratory bird species and tigers in the area will undermine India’s commitment to the conventions.

WII and the National Tiger Conservation Authority have suggested taking cognisance of certain safeguards and mitigation measures while considering project approval, according to the FAC meeting minutes. This will help in better conservation and protection of wildlife in the area, the bodies stated.

For this, FAC ordered the formation of a four-member committee to address apprehensions concerning wildlife as well as endemic flora and fauna of the area in a holistic manner.

It also recommended the formation of another committee with the regional officer of Guwahati and nodal officer (FCA) of the state government as the chairs to visit and monitor the compliance of conditions of the hydroelectric project.

FAC gave the committees three weeks to submit their reports. During the meeting, it was noted that the state government of Arunachal Pradesh was inclined to go ahead with the project.

Source: <https://www.downtoearth.org.in/news/wildlife-biodiversity/etalin-hydel-experts-warn-of-biodiversity-loss-in-dibang-valley-in-letter-to-forest-advisory-panel-83087>