

EXTRACTS FROM INSPECTION REPORT OF THE SUB-COMMITTEE OF THE FOREST ADVISORY COMMITTEE TO ASSESS WILDLIFE VALUES AND ECOLOGICAL IMPACT OF THE URPSIYABAGAR-KHASIYABARA HYDROELECTRIC POWER PROJECT (RKHPP)

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Field visit on: 21-22 April 2012

The proposal The State Government of Uttarakhand vide their letter dated 21.12.2009 submitted a proposal of obtain prior approval of Central Government under the Act for diversion of 217.522 hectare of forest land in favour of the National Thermal Power Corporation Limited for 30 years for construction of 261 MW Rupsiabagar-Khasiyabara Hydro-Power Project in Pithoragarh District of Uttarakhand.

The Project The project site is located in Eastern Kumaon, in the state of Uttarakhand on Goriganga River. The Goriganga River originates at the Milam glacier (at 5000 m ASL) and merges with the Kali River at an altitude of 600 m at Jauljib. The proposed dam site is located at 300 09' 56.39" N latitude and 800 15' 8.6" E longitude at 1720 meter elevation. The power house is located at 300 09' 23.37" N latitude and 800 16' 14.55" E longitude at 1258 meter elevation. Tibet lies to the north of the valley, and Nepal lies in the southeast (Kali river forming the India-Nepal boundary). To the west of the basin is Chamoli district, and higher reaches of the Nandadevi Biosphere Reserve form the boundary here. The basin extends over 2240 km² (WII report, 2003). The area is in Zone 5 seismicity.

Important wildlife area The nearest Protected Area i.e., Ascot Wildlife Sanctuary is located at approx. 11 km distance from the project site. The boundary of the Nanda Devi national Park, one among the two core zones of the Nanda Devi Biosphere Reserve (NDBR) is located at approx. 12.50 km aerial distance from the project site. The Valley of Flower national Park, another core zone of the NDBR is located at approx. 85 km aerial distance from the project site. The site therefore lies in a region that is vital for maintaining the connectivity between important mid-to high-altitude wildlife regions.

WAPCOS's pathetic EIA The EIA report prepared by the WAPCOS to obtain Environment Clearance for the RKHPP reports presence of only 8 bird species. However, as per the existing literature a total of 228 bird species in 30 families and 118 genera, representing more than 45% of the breeding bird diversity of the Western Himalaya and nearly 55% of breeding bird species of the kumaon Himalaya are recorded in the region. Ten species of pheasants are found in the area, including Himalayan monal, and the Koklass pheasant, and several other altitudinal migrants. This assemblage represents 6 out of seven West Himalayan endemics found in Kumaon.

Recommendations The RKHPP is one of the six major Hydro Power Projects proposed to be constructed on the Goriganga river. All other projects except RKHPP are at the conceptual stage.

With respect to RKHPP, the grounds on which the FAC had earlier rejected the project still hold good and we maintain that the project will harm an important wildlife corridor.

We would like to make the following recommendations after our visit and post-visit assessment:

Keeping in mind the ecological value of the region in terms of the vast altitudinal diversity of flora and fauna, the presence of rare and threatened species of orchids (GBPIHED report, 2010), and the importance of the area as valuable wildlife habitat, the proposed RKHPP area is not devoid of ecological and wildlife values as was implied by some groups we met, as well claimed in the proposal for forest clearance.

Further, the NTPC has not taken into accounts the effects of silting and erosion. Although the NTPC claimed that no rare or endangered flora and fauna are found in the region, literature surveys, and personal communications with scientists who have worked in the area have clearly shown that the proposed site is indeed a valuable biodiversity location with many plants, orchids, birds, and mammals belonging to the rare, endangered, or threatened classification. Further, the project lies in the ecologically important zone between the Nanda Devi Biosphere Reserve and the Askot Wildlife Sanctuary (GBPIHED report, 2010) and likely is a wildlife corridor.

Apart from the RKHPP, five major and several small HPPs are proposed to be executed on the Goriganga and its tributaries. Some of these projects are located in or in close vicinity of the wildlife rich upper reaches of the Goriganga catchment and Askot Wildlife Sanctuary. It is suggested that the State Government of Uttarakhand may be asked to undertake comprehensive study through a multidisciplinary team from reputed independent academic institutions to assess cumulative impacts of the existing, under-construction and proposed HPPs in the entire Goriganga river basin.

All hydroelectric projects proposed in the region should only be considered by MoEF for environmental and forest clearance on the basis of such a detailed cumulative impact studies.

In summary, in view of the overall wildlife and biodiversity value and ecological and geological sensitivity of the region we strongly recommend that the Rupsiabagar-Khasiyabara HPP should not be accorded Forest Clearance. We endorse the earlier decision of the FAC to reject the project proposal.