

THE BESIEGED SANCTUARY

Relevant for: Environment & Disaster Management | Topic: Environmental Degradation - Wildlife related issues

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In December 2012, villagers of the Idu Mishmi tribe of Arunachal Pradesh spotted three tiger cubs in the Dibang Valley. They reported the sighting immediately to the forest department. A three-year-long study followed and, earlier this month, it revealed the presence of 11 tigers in the Dibang Wildlife Sanctuary. Unfortunately for them as well as other flora and fauna in the region, “development” has come calling, meaning they might soon have no place to call home.

The Wildlife Institute of India (WII) has effectively paved the way for at least two mega hydel power projects in one of India’s richest biodiverse zones: The Etalin hydel project to be jointly developed by Jindal Power in Dibang Valley district and the Arunachal government and the Lower Demwe hydel project in Lohit district.

The Demwe project is dangerously close to the Kamlang Wildlife Sanctuary and environmentalists have already voiced fears about the adverse impact the power plant will have on the flow of the Lohit river. It will also jeopardise the habitat of the Gangetic river dolphin. A 2014 study of the site by Asad Rahmani, director of Bombay Natural History Society, revealed that the project would also end up submerging parts of the Parshuram Kund Medicinal Plant Conservation Area, home to “globally significant medicinal plants”. The Etalin project paints an equally grim picture.

It entails large-scale forest diversion and the felling of approximately 2,80,000 trees, besides impacting 18 villages. Both are instances of what has become a predictable arc of environmental and ecological disruption. In November, Union Minister for Road Transport and Highways [Nitin Gadkari](#) flagged off several road development works in Chandrapur district, Maharashtra. The Tadoba tiger reserve is located close by and about 100 km of roads will cut through tiger corridors. In Karnataka, in July, the road ministry called for the state’s consent to lift the night-traffic restriction on NH 766 passing through the Bandipur National Park, furthering fears of more roadkills.

In this context, the role of WII assumes great significance. The country’s premier institute on wildlife and forestry, its recommendations often decide if the ministry will grant or deny project clearances. For the Dibang Valley project, the environment ministry modified a recommendation from its Forest Advisory Committee (FAC) to carry out an environment impact assessment.

Taking it further, the WII initiated a study to assess how the project’s wildlife impact can be minimised. In the past, too, the WII has waded into controversy. At a time when, globally, environmental issues are increasingly driving policy, the WII must be more mindful of the responsibility it is vested with.

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