

National Level Conservation Organisations Call for STAY ON CLEARANCE & REVIEW of Athirappilly Hydroelectric Project

A meeting convened jointly by WWF-India and River Research Centre, Kerala, at New Delhi on the issues raised over the **proposed Athirappilly Hydro Electric Project (HEP)** in Chalakudy River Basin, Kerala, **called for immediate stay on the present Environmental Clearance (EC)** under consideration by the Expert Committee for River Valley and Hydroelectric Projects constituted by the Ministry of Environment and Forests (MoEF), Government of India.

The 163 MW proposed Athirappilly HEP planned in the Vazhachal Forest Division is the seventh Hydro Electric Project in the Chalakudy River Basin. Given the consistent violations of the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) Notification 1994 by the Kerala State Electricity Board with regard to the proposed project and in light of the significant gaps in the assessment of the costs, benefits, impacts and options of the project, organizations felt that the project should be considered afresh. The EIA report had not considered the impact on the sensitive ecology and unique biodiversity of the area. The report grossly underestimates the avian and fish biodiversity of the region which has been declared an Important Bird Area (IBA) by Birdlife International and recommended for a Fish Sanctuary by National Bureau of Fish Genetic Resources. Two High Court judgments have also rejected the Environmental Clearance, whereas in the court-ordered public hearings, the people have unanimously rejected the project and project authorities have yet to fully implement the High Court order.

Repeated requests have been made by affected local communities for a hearing before the River Valley Expert Committee has gone in vain. There has been no response to these requests. **Concern over the unwillingness of the MoEF to give an opportunity for project affected communities** was also raised in the meeting. It was felt that the MoEF should be more open and transparent and must invite the concerned groups to make their representations before the expert committee. **The participants welcomed the site visit of the experts of River Valley Committee and insist that the Committee Members must provide sufficiently advance notice for ample opportunity for local communities to raise their concerns during the visit scheduled on 12th and 13th of April 2007.**

It is strongly recommended that the Environmental Clearance should not be provided on the basis of the current EIA and also without giving adequate opportunity to hear the project affected communities. **Presently, Kerala has sufficient power to meet all its requirements and has even been selling power to other states. Hence there should be no urgency to clear the project.** The meeting concluded that this is an opportune moment for the KSEB to urgently take steps to "repair, restore to full capacity, all existing hydro-electric projects in Kerala, minimize Transmission and Distribution losses, prevent theft" as per the directions of the Kerala High Court Order 2001 on Athirappilly HEP case, and the River Valley Expert Committee and the Ministry of Environment and Forests to pause and reconsider the need for the project.

Issued by

WWF-India

River Research Centre (Kerala)

Kalpavriksh Environmental Action Group (Delhi)

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Threats to Conservation of the Southern Western Ghats

Issues raised by the Proposed Athirappilly HEP in Chalakudy River Basin

The global significance of Western Ghats as a high biodiversity potential area cannot be overstated. This Peninsular Indian Hill Range stretching over 1400 km north to south is undoubtedly the basis of the socio- economic and cultural survival and development of the five southern states of India. It also decides the climate of this region. The Southern Western Ghats in which the Kerala State falls is estimated to hold tropical moist forest areas of potential conservation value scattered over more than 20,000 sq.km of area.

The Kerala part of the Southern Western Ghats has indeed a long history of deforestation for several purposes that took place in several phases .In the earlier phases, ecologically sensitive lowland forests along the foothills of the Western Ghats and on the hillocks in the midlands were cleared for cultivation. In the second phase, climax evergreen forests above 900 m altitude msl were cleared extensively for coffee, tea and later cardamom plantations. In the third phase, extensive moist deciduous forests along the foothills, outer slopes and lower plateaus were cleared for forest plantations like teak. In the fourth phase came river valley projects and associated developmental measures. Some of the dams came up after forests were already lost to encroachment (*Nair, S.C. 1991, The Southern Western Ghats, An INTACH Series*). Kerala has 41 west flowing and 3 east flowing short rivers originating from the Western Ghats . The east flowing rivers drain into the Kavery basin in the east. Over the last 60 years, Kerala has built around 60 dams with Periyar, Bharathapuzha, Chalakudy and Pamba rivers being the heavily dammed rivers. While most of the irrigation projects came up in the foothills, the hydro power projects were mostly replacing the evergreen tracts. Many more like Athirappilly, Pathrakadavu, Kuriyarkutti-Karapara etc. are on the anvil.

The longest river in Kerala, the 244 km Periyar alone has 17 hydro electric projects built across its various tributaries and the main river with Idukki group of dams and Edamalayar having very huge submergence. The Pamba River is also overburdened by nine HEPs amongst which the Sabarigiri group of dams has the largest submergence. The 130 km Chalakudy River has six large dams with Parambikulam dam having the largest submergence of around 22 sq.km. The Bharathapuzha, the river with the largest catchment area in the Kerala Western Ghats (6186 sq.km) has the maximum number of irrigation projects built across most of its tributaries. Except for Kunthi, all tributaries are dammed and diverted for irrigation. Kunthi River has been spared thanks to the Save Silent Valley Movement. The destruction and fragmentation of the surrounding forests created by transmission lines, roads, penstocks and power houses, offices and quarters and encroachments remains unaccounted. The history of compensatory afforestation and rehabilitation for these projects is equally dismal.

There have been very few studies on the actual extent of forests remaining, the rate of deforestation, causes of deforestation and the history of forestland encroachments in Kerala Western Ghats. However, the range of studies carried out on the remaining biodiversity of this area reveals the richness and endemism and what would be the loss if further destruction is allowed. These studies also point out the need for long term conservation of the remaining highly fragmented patches of forests that have lost continuity due to the above reasons.

The significance of Chalakudy river valley forests

The forests in the Chalakudy river valley in the Southern Western Ghats are one such stretch that needs special mention. **AJT John Singh** internationally renowned naturalist and conservationist has pointed towards the need for long term conservation of this area in his latest book, 'Field Days' A Naturalist's Journey through South and South East Asia published in 2006 (see page 3-4, chapter1 Anamalais, the 'Elephant Mountains').....some areas of Palakkad special division and Sholayar RF can enlarge

Parambikulam WLS, and Chalakudy RF can form a corridor between Chimony and Parambikulam WLS. All these areas in the Anamalais form an **ecologically diverse and biologically rich composite area** of catchment of 5000 sq.km.

The National Bureau of Fish Genetic Resources has recommended the declaration of the upstream areas of Chalakudy River as **potential fish sanctuary** taking into consideration the endemic and endangered fish populations inhabiting there (*Endemic Fish Diversity of Western Ghats, NBFGR, 2000*) Of the 104 species of fish reported from it, 9 are endangered, 22 are vulnerable and 11 are near threatened. Even Periyar, the 244 km longest river in Kerala, only has 77 species recorded. (*Annual Report of the National Bureau of Fish Genetic Resources (NBFGR) 1999-2000,*).

Vazhachal Division in the Chalakudy river basin is one of the most important in Kerala in terms of biodiversity potential and has a **very high conservation value of around 75 %** (floristic species richness, floristic endemic zone, unique eco systems, faunal endemic zone and mammal density together gives a composite picture of conservation value) only second to Mankulam division in Kerala among the 23 non protected areas in the state (*Biodiversity Conservation Strategy and Action Plan for Kerala prepared by French Institute of Pondicherry for the Kerala Forest and WLD, 2000*). The 413 sq.km Vazhachal Division is also a declared **IBA Area (IN 253)** with A1 (Red Data Book sps.), A2 (Restricted Range sps.), A3 (Biome Restricted Assemblages), birds being found here.

The Asian Nature Conservation Foundation (ANCF) has recommended the upgradation of the status of the Vazhachal Division to a Wildlife Sanctuary or National Park as it has very good elephant habitat. The Asian Elephant Research and Conservation Centre of ANCF, in its studies, have identified a population of 947 Asian Elephants (census 1993) in this area.

The Proposed Athirappilly HEP

The proposal for the 163 MW Athirappilly HEP, the seventh Hydro Electric Project planned in the Chalakudy River basin in the Vazhachal Division has to be viewed against this larger backdrop. Though the area of submergence of forests for this project compared to what has been already lost is miniscule, the long term conservation value of whatever remains in this area in the river valley is most significant for the entire Vazhachal Division and the surrounding protected areas (PA s). The presence of low elevation riparian forests, the extremely high fish diversity, the presence of elephant migratory route from Parambikulam valley to Pooyamkutty forests, the nesting and breeding sites of all the four species of hornbills found in the Western Ghats, the active presence of the larger mammals like lion tailed macaque, Nilgiri Langur, Sambhar, tiger etc., the location of the endangered Cochin Forest Cane Turtle, , etc. in the project area are indications that the extent of loss is more significant than area of submergence.

Meanwhile, the Athirappilly HEP is being pushed ahead by the Kerala State Electricity Board and has reached the final stage of the Environmental Clearance process inspite of consistent public opposition and Court directions. The Environmental Clearance granted to the project was challenged in the High Court of Kerala twice and the clearance was suspended. The significance of preserving this area and rest of Vazhachal- Sholayar forests as an ecological and biodiversity corridor for the bordering Wild Life Sanctuaries (Parambikulam WLS, Chimoni –Peechi-Vazhani WLS, Indira Gandhi WLS) and Eravikulam National Park is swept aside due to the stand alone approach to project impacts by authorities. The downstream social and environmental impacts of the project due to daily flow fluctuation, the impact on the tourism related livelihoods of this global tourist spot etc. are other factors that are overlooked.

The contribution of this project to the annual increase in consumption is negligible. And the situation wherein the flow of the entire river is at the mercy of a single agency, the KSEB, is itself against natural justice.

The chronology of events regarding the Athirappilly HEP case:

1996 – A Rapid EIA carried out by the Tropical Botanical Garden and Research Institute based in Trivandrum in the rainy season only violating the EIA guidelines.

1998/20/01 -The **MoEF gives clearance to the Project** based on a rapid EIA without the public hearing.

2001 - The Chalakudy Puzha Samrakshana Samithi files a PIL in the High Court of Kerala questioning the content, quality and the procedural flaws in the REIA.

2001/10/17 - **High Court judgment on Athirappilly HEP suspended the Environmental Clearance** , directed the KSEB to comply the requirements of EIA procedure by conducting Public Hearing and directed the MoEF to reconsider the clearance given to the project.

2002/02/06 –At the High Court ordered the public, including farmers, tribals, housewives, merchants, technical experts and voluntary organizations reject the project. The PH panel recommends for a comprehensive river basin level EIA covering all the seasons and a fresh public hearing on the Comprehensive EIA.

2005/02/10: The project **granted Environmental Clearance for a second time** by MoEF based on another EIA by WAPCOS, again without public hearing.

2005 April: The Athirappilly Grama panchayath and 'Kadar' tribal (Hunter gatherer tribe classified as PTG) file separate PILS in the High Court of Kerala challenging the EIA by WAPCOS **that was carried out without consulting anybody in the project affected area or the river basin.**

2006/03/23 : The **High Court of Kerala quashes the Second Clearance**, orders a Public Hearing and directs the KSEB to apply afresh for Clearance.

2006/06/15: More than 1200 people who turn up at the High court ordered Public Hearing reject the project on social-technical- environmental angles.

2006/11/15: The River Valley Committee sitting **recommends for Environmental Clearance for a third time** . The Public Hearing panel report submitted has not been approved by all the PH panel members and a copy of the report is yet to be received by them.

2007/02/22: **The river valley committee** decides to make a site visit to the project area to assess the reality.