Nobel laureates lobby for stalled India science project - Economy and Poli...  http://www.livemint.com/2009/09/24213407/Nobel-laureates-lobby-for-s...
mountainous granite over the observatory—one of the reasons why the Nilgiris was chosen.

However, some environmentalists have objected to the project.

An association of green groups known as the Friends of the Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve, which includes the World Wide Fund for Nature, or WWF, the Nilgiri Wildlife and Environmental Association and the Tamil Nadu Green Movement, said that the plying of trucks ferrying building material and the resultant debris that the construction will entail in an area declared ecologically sensitive are enough reasons for the project to be moved elsewhere.

The project, which has been cleared by the ministry of environment and forests, is awaiting clearance from the Tamil Nadu forest department.

"During the initial days of the project in 2006, the Tamil Nadu government was supportive. They even announced it in the assembly. After that it has just been stuck. We are not even told if the clearance is forthcoming or not," said Naba Mondal, a senior scientist at the Tata Institute of Fundamental Research and a spokesperson with the Neutrino Collaboration Group, a body comprising particle physicists from nearly 20 universities in India that is coordinating the INO project.

"This is a basic science project because of which it is only the initial few years that are going to see construction. Moreover, the observatory will be underground and so no forest land needs to be cleared, and post construction, the number of vehicles there is going to be highly regulated," said Mondal.

A.S. Balanathan, principal chief conservator of forests, Tamil Nadu, did not return calls seeking comment. However, his office said that the INO file was "still under process".

Some experts say the project doesn't constitute an ecological threat.

Raman Sukumar, an ecologist at the Indian Institute of Science, Bangalore, said that if the contractors and labourers involved in construction at the premises didn’t stay, and the debris resulting from digging the tunnel was suitably managed, INO wouldn’t really destroy anything.

"I don’t see any obstruction to tiger or elephant corridors from this. There will be a temporary disturbance due to construction, but given that the site is closer to the village, far from the core tiger reserve, there’s no mining or commercial activities involved and the site anyway has tunnels built by the Tamil Nadu government for a power plant, it’s a safe bet," he said.

Anil Kakodkar, chairman, Atomic Energy Commission, made a presentation to a group of environment experts that included Sukumar, regarding the environmental aspects of INO earlier this year.