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Greens, scientists up in arms over proposed observatory in Nilgiris

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Environmentalists fear that INO will impact the elephant corridor in the Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve.

Bangalore: Prominent environmentalists and scientists have written to the Union Ministry for Environment and Forests (MoEF) opposing the underground Neutrino Observatory proposed in the Nilgiris, which they claim will involve thousands of truckloads of material moving through the Bandipur and Mudumalai tiger reserves.

According to the signed statement submitted earlier this week, the India-based Neutrino Observatory (INO) proposed for the Singara area in Tamil Nadu will involve tunnelling out 6,30,000 tons of debris and bringing in 1,47,000 tonnes of construction material through the Mudumalai and Bandipur tiger reserves.

This would translate to around 1,56,000 truck trips through two tiger reserves and 4,68,000 hours of disturbance, according to Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve (NBR) Alliance, a group of organisations that work towards protecting the region.

“The disturbance over the eight years of construction necessary to complete the building of the observatory will surely be enough to stop all wildlife movement through this area,” the statement says, adding that Singara was an important elephant corridor within NBR.

The Rs. 900-crore INO will be situated 1.3 km below the Nilgiri Hills, at the end of a 2 km-long tunnel, and will house a “magnetised iron calorimeter detector” to detect neutrinos, which are naturally occurring elementary particles that could hold the key to fundamental questions about the origin of the universe.

As cosmic rays and natural radioactivity make it almost impossible to detect neutrinos on the

earth's surface, the observatory must be located deep underground, according to a report by Tata Institute of Fundamental Research (TIFR), which is the host institute for the project and one among 24 science institutes involved in it.

Backed by the Department of Atomic Energy, the project has been given environmental clearance by the MoEF and awaits forest clearance from the Tamil Nadu Government.

Among the environmentalists who have signed the resolution are: A.J.T. Johnsingh, former Dean, Wildlife Institute of India; Ajay Desai, co-chair, IUCN Asian Elephant Specialist Group; Ashish Kothari of Kalpavriksh; Belinda Wright, executive director, Wildlife Protection Society of India; Priya Davidar Dean, School of Life Sciences, Pondicherry University; Romulus Whitaker, founder of the Madras Snake Park; and Shekhar Dattatri, wildlife film-maker.

INO project spokesperson N.K. Mondal, professor at TIFR, sets a much lower figure to the amount of material that will be moved.

“During the construction phase, the project will require no more than six round trips every day by convoys comprising a maximum of three trucks each.” Much of the debris would be retained within the site and used for construction, and whatever was not used would be removed “ultimately,” he added.

In August, leading physicists — from the U.S., Japan, Italy and Canada — including Nobel laureates, had appealed to Prime Minister Manmohan Singh to hasten clearances for the project. “INO will ... enhance India's role as an important player in frontline science,” the letter stated.

Meanwhile, Minister for Environment and Forests Jairam Ramesh, who was scheduled to visit Singara and the University of Mysore (which was to be a research hub for the INO) in early October has postponed the visit, according to sources in the Ministry.

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