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Tiger or science?

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An ambitious scientific project is scheduled to come up in the heart of tiger territory in the Mudumalai Sanctuary. A look at the enormous impact it will have on the delicate ecosphere.

Photo: K. Ananthan



Lives interrupted: An elephant herd inside the Mudumalai sanctuary.

One of the best kept national secrets in recent times is an eco disaster waiting to happen. Few environmentalists even are aware of the fact that a top level scientific project, the India-based Neutrino Observatory, is scheduled to be built in Singar a, in the Mudumalai Sanctuary in the heart of tiger and leopard territory. Scientists who presented the news to a shocked local audience in Ooty argued that this was a dream project which was the pride and joy of the Indian scientific world. Questions regarding genuine environmental concerns about the impact on the Nilgiris Biosphere Reserve were met with defensive reactions. The atmosphere at the Ooty Collectorate, where the presentation was made, turned into practically a pitched battle between the scientists versus the conservationists. Raised voices and unnecessarily rude comments are futile and counterproductive. However, many of the questions asked by the Nilgiris activists needed valid answers from the INO team and the Chennai-based Care Earth group, an NGO presenting the pros and cons of the project.

While few people would oppose a science project described as Abdul Kalam's dream, the question being asked by serious local residents and environmental scientists is whether one can really force the country to choose between Science or The Tiger? It's a ludicrous proposition.

Explaining the Neutrino Project to lay people is a difficult and complicated task.

Those interested can go to the INO website for the technical details. For the lay reader it is sufficient to know that an enormous underground observatory is planned in Singara, within the core Tiger Reserve of the Mudumalai sanctuary.

Increasing the conflict

The Care Earth group observed in an interestingly understated observation that one of the drawbacks of the project was the increased traffic that would take place within the sanctuary. Currently the human-animal conflict created by the tourist traffic is catastrophic enough. Any drive through the Bandipur-Mudumalai sanctuary from Ooty to Mysore will provide evidence of devastating damage. There are always a few victims — peacocks, deer, small game and even occasionally a leopard — hit by a speeding truck, bus or car. Scientists from the Bombay Natural History Society and the Indian Institute of Science have documented the ravages. They have collected graphic, stomach-turning photographs of mangled animals.

Elephant herds complete with tiny calves are forced to wait increasingly long periods to cross the road to the waterholes. Their natural corridors are blocked. Local adivasis have noted that animal behaviour patterns have changed. The elephants are more angry and aggressive than ever before. Where earlier adivasis walked confidently through the herds, now they must be careful. On March 24 this year, an angry elephant killed a local young man and injured a woman in Mudumalai. This is in normal times, *now*, before work on the project has begun.

The INO project needs 52,000 tons of iron in the first stage and another 50,000 tons in the second stage *only* for the detector. Additionally, approximately another 35,000 tons of cement, steel, PVC, copper, aluminium, sand and other building materials will be needed. This huge volume of iron and other material will come from Mysore (nearest railway station) normally moved in 20 ton trucks. New roads through the forests will be essential. Normally the Forest department prohibits such disturbance of core areas.

Equally problematic is the debris and muck that will be generated. The official Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) has not yet been released but rough calculations based on the dimensions and scale of the project can be taken from the latest INO report.

The tunnel will be “D” shaped, 6.5 m wide and 6.5 m tall and 2.38 km long. So, nearly 90,000 cubic metres of rock will be taken out. The cavern complex will consist of an Experiment hall (about 22 m wide, 30 m tall and 120 m long) — about 75,000 cubic metres, a smaller cavern for the control facilities of about half the size, and a loading and storage area of about another 60,000 cubic metres. So that’s 2,25,000 cubic metres totally.

Given the density of granite in the area (2.8g/cm) this translates to 6,25,000 tons of debris or about 78,000 truck loads. That means almost 95,000 trucks, and double that

in terms of trips through the forest since the trucks have to go back and forth.

As the construction is scheduled to take about four years, this involves 130 truck trips going through everyday!

Although the INO scientists assured the group that they would contain the damage, local environmentalists have had a bitter experience. Masinagudi has grown from a village of a few hundred people to a town of 10,000 because of the PUSHEP (Pykara Ultimate Stage Hydro Electric Project).

Cavalier attitude

Ms. Jayshree Vencatesan of Care Earth, when asked how such a project could possibly be located in the heart of the Tiger Reserve, replied that it was on *patta* land, a remark that enraged serious environmentalists who have watched the slow erosion of animal turf by the tourist and PUSHEP projects. “Does the elephant or tiger read maps to know when a patch of land in the middle of the forest is declared *patta*?” local conservationists ask.

Nilgiris conservationist Mohan Raj, head honcho of the Nilgiris WWF has reported the lack of transparency or information about the project to local people. He pointed out the absurdity of the scientific presumption that a Tiger Reserve could be termed the “best place” for the project. Ms. Geetha Srinivasan, Vice President, Nilgiris Wildlife and Environmental Association presented a succinct, comprehensive opposition to the project. She pointed out that local experts had not been consulted or informed. She underlined the pitfalls and glaring anomalies. And ended “Let this project be relocated to a more conducive and less controversial place where animals are not affected.”

Indeed the smug complacency of the scientists and the Care Earth presenter prompted Nilgiris Collector Patil to ask, “Have any of you visited the place? Have you seen it yourself? You have to bring thousands of trucks through Bandipur and Mudumalai sanctuaries. And you cannot replace or create wild life once they are finished off.”

To the average person it seems ludicrous to have such a project in the middle of the tiger reserve. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh reserved 600 crores to save the tiger in the March 2008 budget. Mere weeks later, another branch of government proposes to dispose of Tiger territory using science to justify the destruction and havoc about to be wreaked on Mudumalai. The INO project has muscle and power in high places. Only the State government and Forest Department permission stands between the Tiger Reserve and destruction. Tamil Nadu and Mudumalai are proud of its tiger track record. It's the best in the country. Will we save our tigers or allow them to be sacrificed on the high altar of scientific progress? Time is running out for the Tiger. Those who wish to save it must move fast.

