

AGENDA PROPOSED FOR THE 23RD MEETING OF THE STANDING COMMITTEE OF THE NBWL

1. Implementation Protocol on Critical Wildlife Habitats to be approved by the National Board of Wildlife

The Implementation Protocol for Critical Wildlife Habitats (CWHs) was put up on the website of MoEF for comments and it is believed that a draft has been prepared. The identification and notification Critical Wildlife Habitats is of vital relevance to the wildlife conservation and the Standing Committee of the National Board for Wildlife, which is a statutory body mandated to formulate policies and procedures for wildlife conservation, must discuss and approve the Implementation Protocol for critical wildlife habitats.

2. Working of the Standing Committee

The functioning of the Standing Committee has generated much dissatisfaction and discomfort amongst the non-official members, who have brought up the issue repeatedly in various forums, including the former chair. It has also invited media criticism (Two examples: 'Betraying India's Wildlife,' *Governance Now*, October 1-16, 2011, 'Wildlife Board clears 40 crucial projects in two hours', *The Pioneer*, May 19, 2011)

In view of the above it is suggested that there is a need to address the functioning of the Standing Committee.

Requests for clearances that are put before the Standing Committee concern our Protected Areas, the last refuges of many endangered—including endemic—species, and of our biodiversity. Many of the proposals require clearances that adversely impact these habitats and thereby further endanger wildlife. We show our PAs and the laws of the land scant respect, in the casual manner the proposals are dealt with. It's critical that members get the Agenda, with complete information, clear maps etc., which must be provided at least in the stipulated period as given in the notification. Each project proposal/plea for clearance must be presented to the Standing Committee with the Forest Clearance, Environmental Impact Analysis Reports, Environment Clearance and the copy of the detailed Project Reports as provided by the project proponents for the Standing Committee members. The opinion of the State Board of Wildlife should also be put before the committee (the approval of the Chairman of the State Board of Wildlife in the absence of the approval of the Board itself, does not suffice, as is often suggested in the meetings).

It may be suggested here that the proforma of the Forest Advisory Committee regarding information required from states to take the proposal on board is

more detailed. This proforma has been shared with the NBWL so it may be put before the board to be considered as a basis for adapting it for the Standing Committee.

We could also take a view as to whether we can have the procedures of the meeting recorded. Can we electronically record the procedures—so that these are clearly reflected in the minutes, leaving no room for ambiguity and doubt?

As per the notification, the committee's mandate calls for promotion and conservation of wildlife, advising state governments on conservation, effective control of wildlife trade, recommendations in setting up PAs, advise on and control of activities in PAs. In the last three meetings, since the constitution of the new NBWL in September 2010, the Standing Committee has devoted itself to clearing proposals and no agendas of the members have been heard or discussed. Serious issues have been raised by my colleagues on the functioning of the Standing Committee. My plea is that the committee, as well as the board, have a more proactive role in policy, and implementing policy in matters regarding wildlife conservation.

In fact the above note is part of a Joint Agenda put up by five members of the board in the 22nd meeting but was not taken up for discussion.

It is also suggested that the Standing Committee must consider all proposed projects/activities in Ecologically Sensitive Zones and also in areas of immense biodiversity significance ie identified tiger/elephant/other animal corridors that may not necessarily be part of the PA system. All projects need to be considered from the wildlife point of view in these areas including in Eco-sensitive zones, irrespective of Environmental clearance.

To discuss these and other equally serious issues concerning the functioning of the Standing Committee, I second my senior colleague Dr MK Ranjitsinh's proposal that a committee/group be appointed, which will frame the requisite procedures and rules, to be submitted to the Standing Committee in its next meeting.

AGENDA Item No 3

Dachigam National Park, is the only place in the world to have the hangul *Cervus elaphus hanglu*. Apart from the hangul deer—now sadly on the verge of extinction—there are Himalayan black bears, leopards, musk deer and, in the upper reaches, the very rare brown bear and even snow leopards.

Dachigam, touted as 'the Pride of Kashmir' is crumbling today due to apathy, neglect and wilful destruction of habitat. There are encroachments and structures within its tiny 141 sq km area, causing severe deterioration and degradation of habitat.

Some issues that require urgent attention:

- The presence of a sheep-breeding farm (occupying over 10 sq km within the park), with 3,000 to 5,000 sheep is a major threat to the hangul. The sheep are taken to Upper Dachigam in summer, thus disturbing the meadows required by the hangul. Also fodder is taken from lower Dachigam to feed them.
- A trout hatchery in the park was to be moved out. The pollution from this hatchery pollutes the Dal lake and also into Dagwan River, which is the drinking water source for Srinagar.
- There are enclosures for 'captive breeding' of leopards and bears *inside* the national park.
- Gujjars have built semi-permanent dwellings in Upper Dachigam all the way up to Marsar. There are reports that some of these are operating as small eateries/hotels.
- Felling of green kail *Pinus griffithi* trees is going on. Felling of broad leaf trees for charcoal sale in winter is reported.
- Encroachment in Dachigam from the gate up to Brain has contributed to sharp rise in man-animal conflict; Bears are stoned and barbed wire fences have been electrified to keep them away. Some bears have died.
- At Kanger, on the outskirts of Dachigam on the Sonmarg side, an enclosure has been made for hangul. To the best of my knowledge, the NBWL has not been informed—which is mandatory since the hangul is a Schedule I species.

These issues must be looked into. For example, it is believed that the enclosures inside the national park were extended. This must be verified, and whether relevant permissions were given. A realistic assessment of hangul numbers must be done at once. The claim is over 200 animals, but there is a fear that it is even lesser. Whatever be, the population is critically low, and on the verge of extinction. It may be pointed out that the Hangul is one of the species included in the Species Recovery Programme of the Scheme 'Integrated Development of Wildlife Habitats' and financial assistance to the tune of Rs 90 lakhs has been granted to the J&K government. But, the habitat has only deteriorated, and the plight of the hangul is worse than ever.

Agenda Item No 4

This agenda seeks to draw the Standing Committee's attention to the non-compliance by the National Highways Authority of India to the FAC conditions for the construction of a four-lane expressway (NH-54E) through the Dhansiri Lungding Elephant Reserve which forms an important part of the the Kaziranga-Karbi Anglong elephant corridor.

The National Highways Authority of India (NHAI) is constructing a four-lane expressway through the Lumding Reserve Forest in Assam. The highway will

cut through a crucial migratory corridor for elephants, gibbons and gaur and a critical tiger landscape.

The NHAI got permission to cut down over 100 hectares of forest for the expansion of NH-54E, with the preconditions that they would ensure that (a.) no labour camps were set up in the forest; that (b.) a special underpass was to be built so that elephants can cross with minimal disturbance and (c.) that no high-powered lights were to be used.

But, news channel *CNN-IBN* reports that none of the conditions are being met. The height of the underpass that has been made for the elephants is so low that it will be difficult for the animals to pass through.

Located in the Kaziranga-Karbi Anglong landscape, these forests are part of one of the most fecund tiger habitats in the world. The 22,403-hectare Lumding reserve forest is an important wildlife habitat in Nagaon district and stretches through Lanka and Lumding ranges of Nagaon South forest division. It was notified as part of Dhansiri-Lumding Elephant Reserve in 2003.

The Kaziranga-Karbi Anglong landscape is a vital site situated in the erstwhile Indo-Burma Biodiversity Hotspot, now known as the Himalaya Biodiversity Hotspot. **It is home to about 2,500 elephants, 40 per cent of Assam's tigers and 90 per cent of India's one-horned rhinoceros population.**

It is suggested that:

- WWF India has suggested a series of mitigation measures to the National Highways Authority of India (NHAI) so that wildlife in the Kaziranga-Karbi Anglong landscape, which bisects Lumding reserve forest is not drastically affected by the development of NH-54E, these have not been, but must be complied with.
- It is understood that WWF-India had already worked with the engineers of NHAI and had come up with a report for mitigating the threats that the highway might pose. A copy of the report has been submitted to NHAI, Guwahati.
- WWF had recorded canopy contiguity over the road within the stretch from Lankajan to Lumding at 119 places indicating that hoolock gibbons and other arboreal mammals, at that time of survey, could cross the road at many places without fear of being run over by speeding vehicles. Hoolock gibbons are territorial and exclusively arboreal. Any widening would immediately remove the existing 119 sites where canopy continuity that were recorded.
- NHAI must build usable underpasses of adequate height so that elephants can pass through unhindered
- The NHAI diligently follow all the other conditions, including ensuring that no labour camps are established

I respectfully urge the chair and the board to urgently intervene in the matter.

Perna Singh Bindra

Member, Standing Committee, National Board of Wildlife