

Amid Covid-19, India playing a dangerous game with ecology

18 April 2021

As the second wave of Covid sweeps across India, it has become increasingly obvious that we are playing a dangerous global game. As we cut deeper into the world's last remaining forests, and take over grasslands, wetlands and other rare ecosystems, we are blasting away the buffer between nature and people – creating the facilitating conditions for new pandemics to emerge. A new global study, led by researchers from the Key Biodiversity Areas Secretariat at Cambridge, shows that only 2.8% of the world's habitats are ecologically intact, functioning the way they are intended to. The global map of intact ecosystems prepared by these scientists shows major gaps in India. Apart from some pockets in Ladakh and the North-East, at least according to this study, there seem to be no ecologically intact habitats in the rest of the country. At least 60,000 trees for a national highway, a rail track and a power line. Cutting a line through a forest may seem to be a small intervention, worth it because of the impetus to development that better transport networks provide. But having a road or railway cut through a forest is disastrous for wildlife.

Animals are killed in vast numbers by road traffic and collisions with trains. The railway line that cuts through Mollem National Park will also enter Karnataka, impacting the Kali Tiger Reserve. The railway line will take coal, brought in all the way from ships coming from Australia to Goa's Mormugao Port, to steel plants, running on coal power, in Karnataka and Maharashtra. Very close to this railway line is the proposed Hubballi-Ankola railway line (now in hiatus because of a High Court order), which aims to take iron and manganese ore from Bellary to west coast ports in Karnataka and Goa. This proposal, which was opposed by many conservation groups, will fragment the corridor between Bedthi Conservation Reserve and Kali Tiger Reserve. It will also impact the adjacent Dandeli Hornbill Conservation Reserve.

A new railway line is also being proposed between Talaguppa, Sirsi, Siddapura and Hubballi, an area covered by dense forests rich with biodiversity. Meanwhile, in Nagarhole Wildlife Sanctuary, thousands of Jenu Kurubas, an Adivasi tribe of honey collectors, are protesting against attempts to evict them from the sanctuary. The Jenu Kurubas are indigenous groups who have made the forests of the Nilgiris their home for generations. Ecotourism, with roads, safaris and other economically beneficial activities are being encouraged in the sanctuary, but traditional communities are seen as enemies of conservation. Ironically, the global study on ecologically intact habitats finds that a large number of the world's remaining ecologically intact habitats are in areas inhabited by indigenous communities. Indigenous communities like the Jenu Kurubas, with their relatively low-impact ways of living in forests, play an important role in maintaining the ecological integrity of these areas in ways that 'eco' tourists, mining companies, and railway lines certainly do not. It is untrue to say, as most proponents of these railway lines, roads and industrial expansion do, that issues like biodiversity and forest rights are sacrifices that are essential for 'development' and 'progress'.

We have eroded the protective buffer of ecology to such an extent that any further impact can rapidly lead to unexpected 'tipping points,' where development, economy and livelihoods can collapse along with biodiversity. And such a collapse can happen very quickly, as the past year has shown us. New science collated by the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services, an international science body established by more than 100 different national

governments across the globe, shows a clear connection between habitat loss and the likelihood of new pandemics and emerging diseases. Controlling deforestation and maintaining habitat We seem to be doing just the opposite.

Source: <https://www.deccanherald.com/opinion/amid-covid-19-india-playing-a-dangerous-game-with-ecology-975640.html>