



Orissa-based NGO organizes Civil Society Consultation on Wildlife (Protection) Amendment Bill, 2010

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Bhubaneswar: The Wildlife (Protection) Act of 1972 have been amended for more than 4 times since then with some major initiatives in the recent past like expansion of the term 'Protected Area' to include two new kinds of wildlife conservation areas (Conservation Reserve and Community Reserve, which create some scope for community involvement, more being in case of latter), and to create the National Tiger Conservation Authority.

Now, the Government of India has decided to go for some additional amendments and the Bill is ready for public opinion upto 7th July 2010. RCDC, one of the premier civil society organizations of eastern India working on natural resource management studied this Bill and found that it had some advantages as well as disadvantages. For instance, the provision under section 18(A) of the Act, that ensures that the government has to provide alternatives to the people to be affected by a proposed sanctuary, is now applicable to the people of proposed National Park areas.

However, the earlier provision that grazing might be permitted within the sanctuary, is now deleted with a new provision that gives some more facilities to the local communities but without any assurance on grazing. Landowners can now be a part of the management committee if the community reserve is located on private lands, and detail provisions have been incorporated for scientific research, regulation of leg traps, trade in peacock tail feather, and regulation of trade in scheduled (restricted) species. However, there is still lack of clarity on a synergy between the Forest Rights Act, 2006 and the Wildlife Protection Act, 1972. Yes, the guidelines issued on critical wildlife habitats do provide ample scope for involvement of Gram Sabhas, but there should be corresponding provisions in the Wildlife Act & Rules. Although it is an appreciable initiative in the proposed bill to recognize evidence provided by the Gram Sabha during the enquiry for settlement of rights, the present provisions seem quite inadequate to address issues related to critical wildlife habitat and community-based wildlife conservation. Whereas it was expected that there would be a post-FRA amendment to the Act so as to bring it in conformity with the provisions of Forest Rights Act, the present Bill seems to be rather keen on quite different issues which are of course important.

The Sariska exposure and several other field realities have clearly pointed out that the stereotype conservation approach of Forest Department can't be so reliable, despite high investments. On the other hand, people have been protecting wildlife on their own even at the cost of their livelihood. The present Bill is still inadequate to ensure proper enabling mechanisms to encourage such community/private initiatives. There are EDCs in sanctuaries, but field realities confirm that the present provisions under EDCs can't resolve issues related to the life & livelihood of the affected community, nor can it facilitate a true & sustainable community involvement.

RCDC facilitated a civil society consultation today on this proposed amendment, at Hotel Presidency, Bhubaneswar where participants from various NGOs, community-based organizations, and representative from WWF along with some wildlife experts discussed the matter.

Former Chief Wildlife Warden of Odisha Sri Bijay Ketan Pattnaik chaired the session, and the House recommended that the deadline for submission of feedback on this Bill should be extended, and that

the proposed amendment should first incorporate provisions to ensure adequate & immediate compensation for the victims of wildlife attacks, and for early declaration of vermin to the wildlife that threaten human life because of their large numbers, for giving priority on a modified role of forest inhabitants so as to involve them in wildlife conservation instead of their displacement, to provide a helpline to address the issues of victims of wildlife attacks, to make attractive enabling mechanisms for community involvement in wildlife protection, restriction of chemical farming in and around Protected Areas, and use of traditional skills on wildlife capturing/handling, etc.. The Wildlife Act should be brought in conformity with the Forest Rights Act, they said.

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