

## **BATTLE FOR KUDREMUKH**

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**PRAVEEN BHARGAV and NIREN JAIN comment on the successful campaign against mining in the Kudremukh National Park.**



ONE of the biggest wildlife conservation victories came with the Supreme Court's Order to the Kudremukh Iron Ore Company Ltd. (KIOCL), a public sector undertaking, to wind up its destructive open cast mining operations by 2005. This legal initiative by Wildlife First in association with Legal Action for Wildlife and Environment (LAW-E) championed not just the cause of tigers, lion-tailed macaques and other endangered species but also tried to

save the Bhadra from being polluted and the lives of several million marginal farmers and people who depended on it.

Wildlife First's campaign to stop KIOCL from mining in one of the finest rain forests notified as national park where mining was forbidden by environmental and forest laws. This was not another clichéd development versus environment case. It was about a mindless development mistake of the past, which was perpetrating grave damage to valuable biodiversity and rivers systems without any tangible economic benefits for the society.

It all began in 1983-84, when wildlife biologist Ullas Karanth of Wildlife Conservation Society undertook a scientific survey of the distribution of the highly endangered lion-tailed macaque in Karnataka. Based on his report, the Government notified the Kudremukh National Park.

Oblivious of these developments, the KIOCL strategy was to continue mining for another 20 years at Malleswara, the existing site and expand into new areas, east at Nellibeedu and northwest towards Gangrikal. Once mining leases for these areas were wrested, steel ministry had plans of disinvesting in this PSU.

But environmental groups saw through this ploy and early interventions resulted in the forest department objecting strongly to the grant of prospecting licences in Gangrikal, which was finally rejected. The effort to arrest the expansion of KIOCL gained further ground when D.V. Girish, Girija Shanker and K.R. Sethna exposed the disastrous prospecting operations in Nellibeedu due to illegal formation of 40 km of roads and other damage to wildlife habitat ensuring the rejection of the Nellibeedu mining proposal.

Kudremukh National Park (KNP) nestles in the Western Ghats, which has been identified as one of the 25 global biodiversity hotspots. KNP is one of the largest stretches of tropical wet evergreen forests in southern India interspersed with high altitude grasslands and shoal forests. The park is an astonishing treasure house of biological resources, which cannot be recreated after mining by mere plantations of exotics like *Acacia auriculiformis*.

Kudremukh receives an average annual rainfall of 7,000mm. The wet climate and the tremendous water retentive capacity of the shoal grasslands and forests has led to the formation of thousands of perennial streams in the region converging to form three major rivers of the region - Tunga, Bhadra and Nethravathi - that form an important lifeline for the people of Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh, providing sustenance and livelihood to the millions of people living downstream.

Open cast mining is by its very nature extremely destructive. The rainfall in Kudremukh, which is perhaps one of the highest for any open cast mining operation in the world, greatly accentuates the impacts of siltation. The topographic and rainfall characteristics in combination with the open cast mining of low grade iron ore and other land-surface disturbances caused by the KIOCL operations results in very high sediment discharge, with over 60 per cent of the total siltation in the Bhadra system being contributed by the mining area which forms less than six per cent of the catchment. Over 1,00,000 hectares of agricultural land would have been in peril if this sensitive area had not been protected from the ravages of mining at the very source of the Bhadra. In addition, the effects and consequences of habitat fragmentation and biodiversity were poorly understood when the decision to mine was taken in 1969.

The next phase of the campaign centred on a powerful documentary "Mindless Mining" made by filmmaker Shekar Dattatri that drew attention to this critical issue. Several prominent public personalities like the religious seers of Pejawar, Sringeri, Dharamstala, Adichunchugiri, Siddaganga and Sirigere Maths, writers Poornachandra Tejasvi, U.R. Anantha Murthy and social worker H. Sudershan played a key role in persuading the Government of Karnataka to stop the mining.

Backed by scientific data on ecological destruction including the sedimentation study by Jagdish Krishnaswamy, which played a crucial role in shaping public and official opinion, the campaign finally resulted in the State Government taking an environmentally sound and socially responsible decision to terminate the mining lease within five years.

Besides KIOCL's manner of functioning raises the core issue of corporate governance. KIOCL knew that its mining lease would expire in 1999. It also knew, chose to ignore, the changes in the law, which would directly impact on their business. So why did KIOCL make investments in new facilities costing the public exchequer several hundred crores after their lease had expired?

KIOCL, in a desperate bid for survival, turned to the clichéd argument of loss of employment that stopping of mining would cause. The shallowness of that argument was illustrated by comparing the loss of employment of around 1950 workers in the organised sector against the loss of livelihood of unorganised farm workers in the Bhadra command area.

The present trends of globalisation will see further threats to ecologically fragile areas. The campaign leading to a landmark judgment by the Supreme Court serves as a case study for conservation groups who will have to defend important wildlife habitats from ill-conceived developmental projects. The victory is also a powerful message to the corporate world that, for development to continue unhindered, it is imperative that they respect the law of the land and evolve a self-regulatory doctrine steering away from ecologically sensitive landscapes.

However, if we cannot resolve our economic and social problems by using the 97 per cent of the landscape, which is outside the protected areas, but only continue to pillage ecologically fragile areas, we will be doing so at our own peril.

***Wildlife First Features***