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## Crosscurrents



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## Power projects fragment Western Ghats

**Praveen Bhargav**

The Western Ghats is recognised as a global biodiversity hotspot. In the past, many large development projects including highways, railway lines, mega dams, nuclear plants and mines have intruded into this biodiversity treasure trove. Lack of knowledge and absence of effective watchdogs contributed to the *ad-hoc* manner in which such projects were approved.

Today, habitat fragmentation and its consequent 'edge effects' have been scientifically recognised as the primary cause for the destruction of biodiversity rich forests. Yet, we continue to persist with a myopic, short-term exploitation perspective, which fails to recognise the immense and diverse long-term value of biodiversity rich landscapes.

In the absence of a clear land use policy, many development projects are pushed through without proper scrutiny. While projects like big dams and mining are more carefully scrutinised, those branded as '*clean and green*' sneak in through the approval process. They then infiltrate into ecologically fragile landscapes and cause huge negative impacts. Environment impact assessments (eias) though mandatory, lack teeth. They are further reduced to a farce by eia consultants who masquerade as environmentalists. The reports they rustle up are bereft of data. So projects get approved without proper analysis of their impacts.

Wind power and mini-hydel (run-of-the-river) projects are increasingly touted as clean energy. The government has extended massive subsidies—around 90 per cent—to encourage them. The Karnataka Renewable Energy Department (kredl) has approved more than 250 mini-hydel projects.

Around 50 of these mini-hydel projects are located in the ecologically fragile Western Ghats, right in the middle of large blocks of contiguous forests. A direct consequence of such mini-hydel projects is fragmentation of contiguous swathes of pristine rain forests. This directly affects foraging movements and dispersal, and drastically reduces long-term population viability of extinction prone species like elephants, tigers and lion-tailed macaques, while aggravating human-wildlife conflicts.

### Wind power

A similar situation is emerging with respect to wind power projects. Wind power is, no doubt, emission free. However, there is growing evidence that massive wind turbines threaten certain bird species. Wind power projects in mountain habitats also cause serious impacts due to road formation on fragile ridges. Montane grassland and forest ecosystems get fragmented by human intrusion. There is also increased sedimentation in mountain streams and rivers, forests are opened up for laying transmission lines, and there is large-scale disturbance by movement of people and vehicles.

Like in mini-hydel projects, the subsidy-driven regime is a boon for promoters. The rush to establish wind farms is more for 'harnessing' the subsidies rather than wind power. After that happens, the project changes hands or is even abandoned in some cases, scarring the landscape.

### The emissions paradox

A pristine rain forest habitat in Talakaveri Wildlife Sanctuary was scarred in the 1990s. Rusted turbines bear mute testimony to the damage. Yet, in 2002, kredl allowed a wind power company to establish a 57 mw project on the ecologically fragile Bababudangiri Ridge, abutting the Bhadra Tiger Reserve. Intrusions by more than 800 windmills in the plateau of the Western Ghats near Satara have been reported.



In spite of these well-documented ecological impacts, policy-makers and some activists brand such projects as “*environment friendly*”. One such project has even claimed benefits under the clean development mechanism, ensuring its financial viability. Is generating emission free energy more valuable for carbon sequestration than protecting tropical rain forests? Let’s not forget that the latter are crucial carbon-dioxide sinks? Is such clean power really ‘green’? The answer is too obvious.

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