

Under Pressure, Institute eats it's own words- Nitin Sethi, Times of India , April 2007

The Wildlife Institute of India, Dehra Dun, has joined the ranks of "experts" who tailor their recommendations to suit the government's needs. The prestigious body has made a shocking U-turn on its original study on the adverse impact of proposed bauxite mining in Lanjigarh, Orissa, after the ministry of environment and forests, which funds the institute, asked it to reconsider the findings.

The Orissa Mining Corporation Ltd has entered into an agreement with Vedanta Aluminium Ltd to develop this bauxite mine, which falls in an elephant reserve. In its first report, filed in June 2006, the institute had said that "the threats caused by the proposed project to this important eco-system will lead to irreversible changes in the ecological characteristics of the area".

But in its second report, the institute has backed a mitigation plan to take care of these 'irreversible' changes. In a clever use of words, it has diluted its original stand that the area has a substantial elephant presence, and said that elephants existed only in the folds of the hills and not on the hill top (where the mining is proposed), indirectly supporting the state's contention that mining on the hill top would not affect elephants.

While the first report was written on the basis of a field survey conducted by researchers of India's premier wild-life research institute as well as survey of all literature, the second, what the institute has called a supplementary report, has been filed purely on the basis of presentations made by Orissa forest department.

Co-author of the report, Sushant Chowdhry, however, defended the turnaround. He told TOI, "The second report is only a supplementary one. Maybe when read alone it seems to be a dilution but when read with the first report, it shows that we have not changed our stand." He added, "We need to be realistic."

"We have commented on the mitigation plan presented before us, we have not made our own," said Chowdhry. When asked if the irreversible damages could also be mitigated, he said, "These things are going on all over the country."

WII was asked to conduct the study by the controversy-riddled Forest Advisory Committee of the environment ministry after SC instructed the committee to get impact studies done. The SC is hearing a case filed by three petitioners on the forest clearance for the mining proposal.

The bauxite mine in the Niyamgiri hills of Lanjigarh is to supply bauxite to an aluminium refinery plant of Vedanta located at the base of the hills. Upon receipt of a report that came out strongly against allowing mining, the FAC asked the WII to let the Orissa government "apprise the institute with their observations on the report". After state officials met WII, the institute filed this second report.

WII had filed an unambiguous first report. It said the Niyamgiri hill range had an average forest cover density of around 60% (anything above 40% is classified as dense forest by the government). It recorded the presence of elephants and tigers. It said that contrary to the environment impact assessment report of the project, the hilltops are "very productive with high occurrence of several herbivore and carnivore species... elephants visit these areas... these areas are also breeding and fawning ground for four horned

antelopes, barking deer and several other species”.

But in a quick retake, it has used the pretext of socio-economic condition of the people in the region to say in its ‘supplementary’ report that the state’s contention that the area earmarked for elephant reserve would jeopardise socio-economic development was valid. The supplementary report has also accepted the fact that on the hill top, the forest cover is low.