

**CENTRE FOR
WILDLIFE STUDIES**



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18 August 2013

Mr. Leo Saldanha
Environment Support Group
1572, 36th Cross, Ring Road
Banashankari II Stage
Bangalore 560070

Dear Mr. Saldanha:

Reference: Applicant No. 6/2013
Environment Support Group: Applicant No. 12/2013

Thank you for asking me to comment on the report of the Expert Committee of the National Green Tribunal, with reference to the petitions filed by Applicant No. 6/2013 and 12/2013 before the Tribunal's bench in Chennai. I have enclosed my comments herewith in the form of signed note.

In summary, I am of the firm opinion that the diversion of 38 square kilometers of land from this ecologically important and fragile area is excessive and totally unjustified. As I have pointed out in my note, **the area diverted is larger than the entire Bangalore Cantonment and over 20 times the size of the present campus of Indian Institute of Science.**

I trust this communication is useful to the applicants of the petition in the process of enlightening the NGT on the fundamental nature of weaknesses in the report filed by its experts.

With Best Wishes,

K. ULLAS KARANTH, Ph.D, F.A.Sc.
Director

COMMENTS ON THE REPORT OF THE EXPERT COMMITTEE CONSTITUTED
BY THE NATIONAL GREEN TRIBUNAL (NGT) TO EXAMINE THE DIVERSION
OF 3,855 (39 SQ KMS) HECTARES OF PUBLICLY-OWNED GRASSLAND-SCRUB
HABITATS TO SOME CORPORATE, ACADEMIC AND PUBLIC SECTOR
ORGANIZATIONS IN CHALLAKERE TALUK, KARNATAKA

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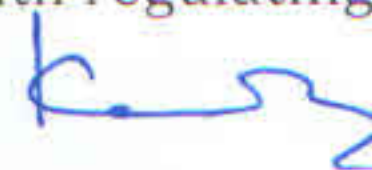
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1. I have carefully examined the report submitted by the Expert Committee to the National Green Tribunal (NGT) in connection with the public interest petition filed by Environmental Support Group (ESG) on the above-mentioned subject. I have also examined the original petition of ESG and subsequent submissions to NGT.

2. Obviously, as averred by ESG, diversion of publicly-owned and accessed land at such a large scale also has major implications for local livelihoods, resource use and cultural practices. The diversion may negatively affect or impact conventional animal husbandry, specialized livestock development programs relating to Amrit Mahal cattle breed, religious activities etc. More importantly such diversion also has major implication for the wise management of present and future land-use, in the context of burgeoning demand for diversion of public land for commercial purposes (e.g. solar power generation) as well as other urban, semi-urban and industrial uses. The present case of land diversion also involves possible violation of earlier specific directions of the High Court of Karnataka in respect to protection of similar Kaval lands.

3. However, my submission here is focused only on implication of the proposed large-scale land diversion at Challakere on the preservation of rare species, natural areas and ecological processes. Such preservation of nature was one of the fundamental reasons for the establishment of NGT based on various earlier judgments and directions of the Hon. Supreme Court of India. **It must be emphasized that the core mandate of NGT is not to promote industrial development or higher education or space research** (all worthy causes for which there are other constitutionally empowered authorities). **It is to ensure the essential attributes of a habitable environment and preservation of natural landscapes do not get eroded continually under various pressures.** My comments on the Expert Committee report made below primarily address this aspect of the Challakere land diversion issue.

3. However, I would like to add here that my comments are based not just on my 25 years of experience as a practicing wildlife scientist, including studies of grassland fauna such as blackbuck, great Indian bustard, and other allied species of these habitats as far back as in 1982. These comments are also shaped by my past experience of serving on Indian Board for Wildlife and Forest Advisory Committees of MOEF/GOI. These bodies are entrusted with regulating and



minimizing the diversion of land from National Parks, Sanctuaries and Reserved Forests. The excessive and unjustified demand on such protected public lands by most project proponents – to avoid the alternative of contentious private land purchase issues – is a systemic problem that I have encountered and dealt with while serving on these two statutory bodies over a number of years.

4. As a background to the Challakere land-diversion issue, I note and emphasize that wild lands in a somewhat natural state constitute less than 10% of India's land at present. Even more pertinently, Protected Areas (PAs) that primarily harbor large-bodied, rare or extinction-prone wildlife species now constitute less than 4% of India's land. Even this small fraction under protection is mostly located in relatively densely forested regions, upper reaches of mountains and in Marine reserves. There is very little representation of the drier ecological regimes and habitats possibly less than 0.1% of land area.

Particularly, poorly represented in Protected Areas are reasonably intact dry natural grassland and scrub habitats of the Deccan Plateau, which still support populations of typical mammals such as wolf, blackbuck, Goitered Gazelle or chinkara, honey badger and the Indian fox. The cheetah has been already extirpated about 70 years ago from this habitat, and, its typical birds such as the great Indian Bustard, lesser florican, coursers, sand grouses as well as harriers and other grassland adapted raptors are suffering major population declines. Even the best existing example of such remaining habitat, in Rollapadu Wildlife Sanctuary in Andhra Pradesh is merely 600 ha in size! This sad state of affairs of dry-zone habitats arises from a historic reason: because these habitats do not support large, valuable timber trees, they were mostly left out of the Forest Reservation process in the 19th century. This caused their gradual conversion to agriculture or degradation under excessive pressures from rural sector. This steady erosion is now being compounded by a new set of demands arising from the urban-industrial sectors, such as in the present case at Challakere. Realizing this broad problem, the MOEF Government of India has emphasized the crucial importance of retaining such natural scrub-grasslands of arid and semi-arid regions (see Appendix).

5. I would also like to point out that the entire Challakere area is totally deficient in terms of quantitatively documented data on its current wildlife and floristic abundance and diversity. The reports cited by the Expert Committee, including the 'rapid assessment' by IISC, are wholly inadequate in terms of quantitative data from this data deficient area. **In the absence of such full and careful documentation, it is easy for non-specialists to dismiss such areas as being of inherently low natural ecological value. The ongoing/planned efforts to plant trees claimed by various beneficiaries of the land diversion documented in the Expert Committee report are in themselves a clear example of ecological ignorance of these user agencies.** I am surprised that even a 'scientific' institutional user, like the Indian Institute of Science (IISC) has also not been an exception to the standard practice of 'green-washing' in form of claims of substantial "tree planting". What is really required instead and conspicuously absent is a serious attempt to preserve the land-base and recover the native vegetation and resident fauna in these natural habitats. Unfortunately,

the Expert Committee also appears to have not really fathomed how scarce these scrub-forest and grassland matrix of habitats of Deccan plateau have become now, and how data deficiency makes it almost impossible to make a full assessment of their ecological importance. The committee's excessive focus on the history and future of Amrit Mahal cattle husbandry, and its lack of recognition of overall context of scarcity of such natural habitat types under serious protection in Deccan Plateau, is a major inadequacy of the report in my opinion.

6. In this context of rarity of these types of habitat, the demand for diversion of public land from these scarce habitats by various project proponents in the present case (from page 48, in Expert Committee report) noted below is quite excessive in my opinion:

Diversion to Industrial, Commercial and Urban uses (in Hectares)

Sagitaur Private Limited (Solar Power Generation)	= 405
Small Scale Industries (KSSIDC)	= 121
Karnataka Housing Board (KHB)	= 20

Total diversion for industrial and urban uses = 546 hectares (5.5 sq. kms)

Diversion to Academic and Research Institutions (in Hectares)

DRDO	= 1736
BARC	= 732
IISC	= 607
ISRO	= 232

Total land diversion for research/academic users = 3307 Hectares (33 sq.kms)

Grand total area diverted = 3,853 Hectares or 39 sq. kms

7. I find it particularly appalling that an area of 405 ha is to be diverted to a private company for solar power generation. Already, other so-called 'green energy' projects such as wind farms (on hills) and small and medium hydel power projects (in valleys) are causing immense and well-documented ecological damage. These green energy projects are not even economically justifiable in most cases and are burgeoning only because of political support they enjoy in the form of inflated power purchase arrangements, tax holidays and cheap or virtually free grant of public lands.

At this stage, initiating a new trend of granting public lands in the plains for solar power generation, which in its very nature is extremely land-hungry (EU countries are planning solar farms located in distant Sahara, not in Europe) is a very ill-considered path to follow, given India's high human population density and aforementioned shrinkage of natural dry zones where solar projects are being proposed. The Forest Advisory Committee (FAC) had in the past taken serious note of this problem and turned down several cases of diversion of lands

for solar power generation in Maharashtra and elsewhere. In the light of this, the grant of 405 ha land for a tiny solar power generation by this private company must be rejected outright. No such precedent should be set for other business interests to follow and make similar demands elsewhere in the State/Country. In comparison, it may be noted that a major nuclear power facility at Kaiga, generating 880 mega-watts of power, occupies less than 600 ha of land including its surrounding campus.

8. Even in the cases of the other public and semi-public research and academic institutions, the extent of land being diverted-**3307 ha or 33 sq. kms** is clearly excessive. **Such excessive demand to grab public land for free is a common practice I have noticed in the case of forest land release demands that come up before the Forest Advisory Committee and the National Board for Wildlife.** However, once heavy costs are imposed on a per acre basis, the scale and extent of such demands tend to come down drastically. There have been many cases before the Forest Advisory Committee, involving Universities, Government agencies of various kinds and public and private sector industries who were denied grant of forest lands or their demands drastically scaled down to reasonable levels through a rigorous analysis. The expert committee has failed to perform such a rigorous analysis of the excessive demands made in the Challakere case.

9. I find it hard to comprehend why an area as large area of 3,307 ha (even after excluding the solar power project-which by its very nature places huge demand on land as mentioned in point 6 above) is being demanded by academic and research institutions supported by tax payers. The scale and nature of this excessive demand becomes clear when viewed in the context of areas presently occupied by some installations and facilities:

NCBS-TIFR campus at Hebbal	=	8.1 ha
Lalbagh Botanical Garden	=	97.1 ha
Cubbon Park Bangalore	=	121.0 ha
Indian Institute of Science, Bangalore	=	170.0 ha
University of Ag, Sciences -GKVK, Hebbal	=	526.1 ha including crop fields
Bangalore Cantonment total area	=	3367.0 ha
Mysore City Total area	=	12840.0 ha

In other words, the area being diverted to academic and research institutions such as IISC, DRDO, BARC and ISRO at Challakere equals the total of Bangalore Cantonment area and is a third that of entire City of Mysore, the second largest city in Karnataka! The area demanded is 20 times the size of the present IISc Campus in Bangalore! I see absolutely no justification for what appears to be a blatantly excessive demand for land.

10. In view of the above facts, NGT must take serious note of this precedent-setting, excessive land claim and reject it entirely. NGT may direct only academic and public sector institutions involved, who are clearly driving this project with the solar industrial user piggy-backing on their reputation to come up with an alternative, realistic plan of their projected land needs. Such a realistic demand

can come up for consideration of the State Government using normal land acquisition processes in an appropriate location. These publicly owned, ecologically important lands in Challakere should not be diverted even in their cases. The claims of the industrial and urban users including the Solar Power generation project must be rejected entirely.

Furthermore, I note that substantial parts of the Challakere grassland-scrub habitats are not under agriculture (being largely unfit for agriculture because of low rainfall). However, they are capable of supporting typical native fauna and possibly some, reduced and sustainable level of livestock grazing (set based on scientific studies). Thus NGT should therefore, order their immediate notification of these Kaval lands and other scrub forests as 'conservation reserves' under the Wildlife Protection Act so that they receive a higher degree of protection in future and get excluded from any future claims for diversion for other purposes.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'K. Ullas Karanth', is written above the printed name.

K. ULLAS KARANTH, Ph.D, F.A.Sc.