

Indian Government should have listened to BNHS on Andhra power plant

Title The four lives lost in police firing at Sompeta in Srikakulam district of Andhra Pradesh, India protesting against the thermal power plant by Nagarjuna Construction Company, would have been saved, had the government listened to the Bombay Natural History Society (BNHS, BirdLife in India) report submitted in December 2009 concerning power plants in the wetlands of Srikakulam district. BNHS is of the view that there is a dire need for a Wetland Conservation Act and that wetlands should not be considered as wastelands. In the report submitted by BNHS and Wildlife Institute of India to the Ministry of Environment and Forests (MoEF), based on field visits and surveys in Srikakulam district, the primary recommendation was that East Coast Energy Pvt Ltd should not have undertaken development on the Naupada site in Srikakulam district and should vacate the ecologically important wetland, designated as an Important Bird Area (IBA) by BNHS and BirdLife International. It was recommended that it should be declared as a Conservation Reserve in its entirety. It was also mentioned clearly that no other wetland in the region should be given to any developmental agency and the proposal to develop a thermal power plant in Sompeta (the one by Nagarjuna Construction Company whose clearance has now been cancelled) should be scrapped. Excerpts from the BNHS report are as follows. "No other wetland should be given to Andhra Pradesh Industrial Infrastructure Corporation Limited or any other developmental agency for industrial development. For instance, there is a plan to construct another thermal power plant in Sompeta wetland. The local people are already opposing the plan. Proposal to develop a thermal power plant in Sompeta should be cancelled outright." Conservation and people should go hand-in-hand. BNHS had opposed the Sompeta thermal power plant due to the biodiversity values as well as the opposition from the local community, which is dependent on the wetlands for their livelihood. The companies who want to put up power plants on wetlands take pictures in summer when there is no water and then claim them to be "wastelands". However, both Naupada and Sompeta are under water for almost eight months of the year and provide livelihood to local communities and habitat to biodiversity. BNHS Director Dr Asad R Rahmani said, "I hope this unfortunate incident will open eyes of the government and proper legislation will be brought for wetland protection similar to the Forest Conservation Act and Coastal Regulation Act." BNHS spokesperson further said that it is extremely unfortunate that suggestions by BNHS were not considered and the Nagarjuna Construction Company was allowed to forcefully take up the land in Sompeta resulting in the unfortunate death of four local protestors in police firing. Image credit: Otto Pfister