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Biofuel project near India's rhino heartland sparks protests

by **Bikash Kumar Bhattacharya** on 22 November 2017

- *India's state-owned Numaligarh Refinery Limited and Finnish firm Chempolis Oy plan to build a bioethanol refinery near Kaziranga National Park in India's Assam State.*
- *The project is touted as green and sustainable, but faces opposition from local activists who fear it will cause pollution, increase human-wildlife conflict, and negatively impact the habitat of elephants, rhinos and other wildlife.*
- *Activists also cite concerns about the project's environmental impact assessment process, and its proposed location in an officially designated "no-development zone."*

On July 15 this year, activist Soneswar Narah stepped up to express his views in a public hearing on an upcoming bioethanol refinery. The project, a joint venture between India's state-owned Numaligarh Refinery Limited (NRL) and Finland's Chempolis Oy, is slated to be built near Kaziranga National Park in India's northeastern Assam state.

Many locals like Narah oppose the project, saying it will have harmful impacts on Kaziranga's fragile ecosystem and is likely to intensify human-wildlife conflicts in the Numaligarh area, given its proximity to an elephant corridor.

During the public hearing, Narah said, the microphone was cut off before he could say "anything provocative," and police barged in, dragging him away.

Narah was arrested by the Assam state police and charged with multiple crimes, including "attempt to murder," "assault or criminal force to deter public servant from discharge of his duty," and "criminal act done by several persons in furtherance of common intention."

There are two starkly different versions of what exactly sparked Narah's arrest.

According to the official minutes of the public hearing, approved by the local government and pollution control board, Narah, an adviser to the Kaziranga-based farmers' and tribal rights advocacy group Jeepal Krishak Shramik Sangha, "comes to stage and started speaking against the project. After that he took out the container containing combustible material which he tried to lit [sic] up in the stage which was protested by the public present and during the commotion police whisked him out of the venue as the situation became tense because of his act."

Narah refutes the allegation, calling it “an attempt to muzzle dissent.”

“If I recall correctly, as Narah started expressing his concerns regarding the potential negative effects of the plant, police forcefully carried him offstage,” said Suchil Saikia, president of the local farmers’ organization Ponka Gramya Pothar Porichalona Samiti, who was also at the public hearing and corroborated Narah’s account.



A wild elephant crosses a busy national highway that passes through the Deopahar Proposed Reserve Forest. Locals fear further encroachment in the forest will escalate human-wildlife conflicts. Photo by Rubul Ahmed.

Wherever the truth lies, the incident at the July public hearing highlights the tensions this project has created in one of India’s most politically and ecologically sensitive regions.

Jeepal has criticized the proposed biofuel plant on several grounds: potential negative impacts on the nearby Deopahar Proposed Reserve Forest and the greater Kaziranga ecosystem, as well as pollution-related hazards in nearby residential areas; irregularities in obtaining environmental clearance for the project; and the blocking of a critical elephant corridor.

The public hearing on the project was initially scheduled for May, but was delayed following a public outcry after NRL and the Assam State Pollution Control Board failed to adhere to statutory guidelines on conducting public hearings. The meeting was originally scheduled for a working day without sufficient prior notice, and was not advertised in at least two major local newspapers, as required by India’s

environmental law. Narah described the timing and lack of notice as “a bid to keep critics at bay.”

NRL’s public relations officials declined to comment to Mongabay about the scheduling of the meeting or other issues regarding the bioethanol plant.



The spot where it is said the bioethanol project plant will be located. Photo by Rohit Choudhury.

Deopahar: “an integral part of Kaziranga ecosystem”

Conservationists fear the NRL-Chempolis bioethanol project will be ecologically disastrous. The proposed refinery site is in the village of Owguri Chapori, just outside the Deopahar forest and only about 20 kilometers (12 miles) east of Kaziranga National Park, a World Heritage Site that is the global stronghold of the greater one-horned rhinoceros (*Rhinoceros unicornis*), and home to Bengal tigers (*Panthera tigris tigris*), wild water buffalo (*Bubalus arnee*) and numerous other threatened and endangered species.

The Deopahar forest is a 133-hectare (329-acre) patch of woodland hosting elephants and several rare species of felines, reptiles and butterflies. Though

officially recognized in 1999 as a “proposed reserve forest” by the Assam State Forest Department , it has still not been granted fully protected status.

“Deopahar is an integral part of the Kaziranga-Karbi Anglong ecosystem,” said Manoj Gogoi, a local conservationist and founder of Naturalists for Rehabilitation of Snakes and Birds (NRSB). He said the Kaziranga and Deopahar forests were all “one ecosystem” before human intervention led to fragmentation.

Gogoi said further habitat fragmentation and loss of forest cover in the Kaziranga-Karbi Anglong landscape must be stopped. During monsoon floods, when Kaziranga’s swampy lowlands are inundated, the park’s marooned wildlife seeks refuge in the neighboring Karbi hills, and sometimes migrates as far as the Deopahar wilderness.

“Deopahar forest provides shelter for the wildlife fleeing flood-affected Kaziranga National Park. There are instances when rhinos strayed out of Kaziranga [and] took shelter in Deopahar,” Gogoi said. “Deopahar is a crucial temporary habitat for Kaziranga’s wandering wildlife.”

Rohini Ballav Saikia, a Kaziranga divisional forest officer, denies that the project will have a direct impact on Kaziranga’s rhino population, saying Deopahar is not known to host rhinos; but he concedes such projects are not desirable in the proximity of a critical wildlife habitat.



A patch of Deopahar forest land cleared by to build a golf course. Photo by Rohit Choudhury.

Claims NRL “flouts environmental laws”

Although efforts to secure fully protected “reserve forest” status for Deopahar have not yet succeeded, there are regulations restricting encroachment in the forest.

In 1996, when NRL was allocated land for a petroleum refinery in the area, the Ministry of Environment and Forest (MoEF) expressed grave concern over its establishment near Kaziranga. “[A] Petroleum Refinery at Numaligarh (East of Kaziranga) and the developmental activities for said refinery is likely to cause tremendous pressure on the natural resources and the wild-life habitat in the Kaziranga National Park and its surroundings,” the ministry said in an [official notice](#). The same notification declared a prohibition on any development activities within 15 kilometers (9 miles) of the Numaligarh oil refinery.

The NRL-Chempolis bioethanol plant falls within that zone. “Hence locating the biofuel plant here in Owguri is in direct violation of the 1996 MoEF directive,” Narah said.

If the project is built, it won’t be the first time NRL has breached the “no-development zone.” The Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change has [cited the company](#) for a 2004 expansion of its township that violated the NDZ, as well as the construction of a pipeline through the forest without prior approval. In 2014, NRL [illegally cleared a patch of Deopahar forest for a golf course](#), drawing the ire of the National Green Tribunal, India’s specialized forum for expediting environmental justice.

Conservationists argue that the [implementation of environmental laws in India has always been weak](#). Enforcement has taken a further [downturn](#) under the present Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government, which aggressively promotes industry and has facilitated the steamrolling of environmental clearance processes for ambitious national developmental projects like the [controversial Ken-Betwa river-linking project](#).

The NRL-Chempolis bioethanol plant, enthusiastically promoted by Prime Minister Naredra Modi, has similarly “razed through the environmental clearance process,” according to a pamphlet issued by Jeepal this July.

Among the issues cited is the project’s environmental impact assessment, viewed by Mongabay, which fails to mention the presence of the Deopahar Proposed Reserve Forest near the plant. “Concealing such critical information is a serious offense, and this means obviously the EIA didn’t consider the project’s potential impacts on Deopahar forest,” Jeepal asserts.



A view of Deopahar forest from afar. Photo by Suryya Chetia.

The Finnish connection: “eco-friendly Finnish technology”

On its website, [Chempolis](#) says the technology to be used in the plant, called Formicobio, is an environmentally sustainable and low-emission technology for processing bamboo into cellulosic ethanol.

But local residents are skeptical that the process will be entirely pollution-free.

“The NRL authorities here have been preaching that the technology involved in the bioethanol refinery is an eco-friendly Finnish technology,” Gautom Tanti, a resident, told Mongabay. “But we aren’t convinced. The existing NRL oil refinery has already created enough pollution-related problems in the nearby villages. The waterways in our village got contaminated after the NRL refinery came up. Particularly the wastewater and rainwater spilled from the refinery during monsoon pollutes water sources.”

Tanti and other villagers believe the establishment of the proposed bioethanol plant will aggravate this problem.

But while NRL has been trying hard to win over the locals by touting the “Finnish connection” in the bioethanol joint venture, Chempolis has itself gotten mired in a controversy over potential conflicts of interest. Last month, Finland’s [Iltalehti newspaper reported](#) that Chempolis has business ties to Finnish Prime Minister Juha Sipilä’s family, and that the PM lobbied for the company during a February 2016 visit to India, when the NRL-Chempolis joint venture was mooted.



A one-horned rhino grazes in Kaziranga National Park, which home to the world's largest population of the species and is located only around 12 kilometers from the proposed project site. Photo by Satish Krishnamurthy/Flickr/CC BY-SA 2.

Local resistance

On May 22, residents of Owguri Chapori organized a massive protest against the bioethanol refinery. Tanti, who took part in the protest, says they are against the project because it will have harmful impacts on both the people and the wildlife. Locals fear it will also aggravate the already severe human-elephant conflict in the area, he added, as it verges on the Deopahar elephant corridor.

As he told Mongabay how the area had turned into [ground zero for human-elephant conflicts after the NRL cleared part of an elephant habitat](#), Tanti pulled out a worn-out placard he said was displayed at the rally in May. It reads: "Stop building biofuel plant near Deopahar, Stop making Numaligarh a battleground of man and the wild."