

Threatening Himalayan Dam Project Dropped?

Doubts have arisen about the future of a huge dam project on Nepal's Karnali river, which conservationists say threatens one of the country's principal wildlife areas. A government official said that the US corporation Enron had withdrawn its application to build a hydro-electric project involving an investment of up to \$6 billion (Reuters, 1998).

The dam on the Karnali, which drains a large area in the world's highest mountains, was planned to produce 10,800 megawatts of hydropower for export to India and China. India, especially, is gravely short of power for industrial development, while China needs power for development of its Tibetan region. Enron proposed to build the dam and transmission lines to Tibet across the Himalayas.

However, a few days later, Prime Minister Girja Prasad Koirala said that Enron was still considering returning to the project (Anon., 1998). He said he had a fax from Enron expressing willingness again to carry out the project.

An Enron spokesman said the company had pulled out because of uncertainty about selling a large block of power outside Nepal.

But analysts said the withdrawal was due to unstable politics in Nepal, which has had five changes of government in three years, and the slowness of previous governments to make decisions on the project.

In 1995, the World Bank dropped plans to lend \$175 million for a hydropower project on the Arun, another of Nepal's great Himalayan rivers. It said Nepal should focus on smaller power plants on its many rivers.

As the Karnali drops to the lowland terai region of Nepal and flows on to India to join the Ganges, it passes through the western end of the Bardia National Park, which holds the second largest tiger population in Nepal, as well as great one-horned rhinos *Rhinoceros unicornis* and a host of other wildlife. Conservationists say that construction work, necessitating a huge labour force and earth-moving, with a network of roads, would prove near fatal for this important wildlife area.

References

Anon. 1998. *Enron deal isn't dead*. International Herald Tribune, 20 April 1998.

Reuters. 1998. *Enron drops effort to build dam in Nepal*. International Herald Tribune, 14 April 1998.

Crackdown on Trade in Tiger and Rhino Parts in USA

Any product in the USA claimed to contain tiger or rhino products will be illegal, and violators will be subject to up to \$25,000 in fines and one year in prison under legislation approved by the House of Representatives by voice vote on 28 April.

The legislation, which now goes to the Senate for approval, allows inspectors to seize any product labelled as containing rhino or tiger parts without performing DNA tests to verify the contents.

The bill's sponsor, Representative Jim Saxton (Republican-New Jersey), said there were "thousands of prepackaged Oriental medicines sitting on pharmacy shelves throughout America with labels indicating they contain parts of rhinos and tigers."

The Clinton Administration earlier threw its support behind the legislation. Secretary of the Interior Bruce Babbitt said: "The United States will do its utmost to ensure that the next commemoration of the Year of the Tiger (in 2010) is a celebration and not a wake. This legislation will have the full support of the Administration and, if enacted, will add to other efforts to assist our international partners in rhino and tiger conservation. This country will use every

tool it has to help save the world's wild rhino and tiger populations from extinction due to illegal trade and habitat loss."

Tigers and rhinos are protected under the U.S. Endangered Species Act and by international treaties, but trade in their parts continues to flourish, particularly for Asian traditional medicines.

Wildlife inspectors all over the USA routinely find shipments containing wildlife products labelled as containing protected species parts, especially of rhino and tiger. Once these mass-produced products reach the United States, even when labelled as containing rhino or tiger parts, the legal burden of proof falls on the Service to demonstrate scientifically whether the products actually contain what the labels say. According to the Service's forensic experts, it is a very time-consuming and costly process to develop a DNA analysis test to identify any particular group of wildlife, such as all rhinos or all tigers. Given this situation, seized items must often be returned to the importer because it is not possible to show any violation of any existing U.S. law, such as the Endangered Species Act or the Lacey Act. In addition, because enforcement is so difficult, these products are easily found for sale.

Babbitt declared: "These products, whether or not they actually contain rhino or tiger parts, stimulate demand and feed the market that makes these critically endangered animals more valuable dead than alive."

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the Federal agency charged with implementing the Rhinoceros and Tiger Conservation Act, is assisting rhino and tiger range states with expanded on-the-ground conservation efforts. Domestically, the Service has been working in partnership with local Asian communities to develop educational materials to address the thriving illegal trade in traditional oriental medicines purported to contain tiger or rhino parts and its impact on wild populations.

Babbitt said he was encouraged to report that, thanks to appropriations provided by the U.S. Congress for the Rhinoceros and Tiger Conservation Fund, range countries in Africa and Asia were reporting progress in their efforts to combat the forces responsible for the absolutely desperate state of these species due to habitat degradation and the illegal trade.

It is thought that there are no more than 5,000 to 7,500 tigers left in the wild. The total population of all three Asian rhino species is less than half the number of tigers