

Green awardee trampling on the green



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At the prestigious [India](#) Today PSU Awards 2014, the Numaligarh Refinery Limited ([NRL](#)) was awarded the 'Most Eco-Friendly Public Sector Unit (PSU) in the Miniratna category. It was stated that the [award](#) assumes a great [deal](#) of significance since the selection process included all the 229 PSUs nationwide in the fray and is, therefore, a befitting recognition of the innovative, sincere and dedicated efforts of the company towards preservation and conservation of the ecology and the environment.

A year later [NRL](#) was once again in news—this time for sending rare and Scheduled I species to death throes! The anti-conservation strategy and gross violation of environmental norms by the company drew flak from all quarters and taking cognizance of the serious violations, the [Principal](#) Bench of the [National](#) Green Tribunal has ordered impleading the [NRL as](#) a respondent in the Original Application No.38/2011 (Rohit Choudhury versus Union of [India](#) and Others) and Miscellaneous Application (MA) No. 787/2015 in connection with the issue of illegal boundary [wall](#) constructed by the [NRL](#) on the elephant corridor in the “No [Development](#) Zone” of the Proposed Deopahar Reserve Forest.

Deopahar is an important [elephant](#) habitat and the erection of the [wall](#) across the [elephant](#) corridor turned out to be a physical barrier for the pachyderms. Elephants, especially calves, [as](#) they try to cross [over](#) to and from the hilly terrain of the forest, slip off to their death inside the [wall](#). More than [10](#) elephants died since 2011 in the ‘trap’ constructed by the [green](#) company!



Destruction of forest cover by [NRL](#) for Golf Course.

Photo source: Forest Department

Intervention in critical habitat

With a view to achieving the targeted 33% of the forest cover in the plains and 60% in the hills under the [National](#) Forest Policy (1998), the Government of Assam declared the Deopahar forest in the Golaghat district [as](#) a Proposed Reserve Forest on 18/08/99 with an area of 133.45 hectares and appointed the Deputy Commissioner (DC) of Golaghat [as](#) Forest Settlement Officer (FSO). The notification was published in Assam Gazette dated 13/9/99. This gesture of the Government of Assam was hailed by one and all because the declaration came at a critical juncture [as](#) the district was going through a massive eco-disaster with almost 93% of its total reserve forest areas (excluding the [Kaziranga National](#) Park) were in the throes of destruction. In such a situation there was every need to elevate this important patch of forest to the status of a Reserve Forest, but for reasons unknown, Deopahar continued with the status of a PRF to be encroached upon by booming industries.

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Deopahar, which was handed [over](#) to the forest department by the civil administration of Golaghat in 1968, is a small hill with an area of 134 hectares near Numaligarh, in Golaghat district. The notification shows this stretch of forest land bounded by the Numaligarh tea estate and the Numaligarh garden road in the northern side while the NH 39 approaches the hill from the south-western side. The Kalioni hills and part of Rajgarh lie to its east. Known for its archaeological heritage since the ancient period of Assam history, Deopahar hosts unique biological diversity.

Dr Padmeshwar Gogoi, environmentalist and retired head of the Department of Botany, Devraj [Roy](#) College, documented a treasure of medicinal plants in Deopahar —Amul (*Horsfieldia kingii*), arjun (*Terminalia arjuna*), amlakhi (*P. emblica*), nephaphu (*C. colebrookianum*), mejankri (*Litsea cubeba*), sarpagandha (*Rauvolfia serpentina* Benth.), bhajaguti, bohera, to different [bamboo](#) varieties, orchids and ferns. The forest's upper and middle wooden canopy has wide ranging variety—Poma (*Cedrela toona* Roxb.), Gomari (*Gmelina arborea*), Som (*P. bombycina*), Bheleu (*Tetramilos nodiflora*), Uriam (*Bischofia javanica*), Nahor (*Mesua ferrea*), Hilikha (*T. chebula* Retz.), Seleng (*Sapium baccatum* Roxb.), Owtenga (*Dillenia indica*), Nagabheh (*Schima wallichii*), Paroli (*Sterospermum chelonoides*), Sopa (*Michelia champaca*), Morhal (*Vatica lanceaefolia*), Jatipoma (*Cedrela febrifuga*), Lali (*Walsura robusta* Roxb.), Holokh (*Terminalia myriocarpa* Heurck) etc.



Photo source: Forest Department

Apart from housing some rare cat species, reptiles, butterflies, local and migratory birds, the presence of wild bee hives on the Bheleu trees show signs of its pristine environment. After the massive destruction of the Nambor Reserve Forest, the oldest in the State--a few Hoolock gibbon families, otherwise marooned in the fragmented habitats in and around Nambor, [found](#) a safe refuge in Deopahar. Deopahar became an important transit for the animals migrating to and from Karbi Anglong to [Kaziranga](#). This patch of forest now provides shelter to some 200-300 wild elephants.

Telgaram, where the Numaligarh Refinery is situated, is known for its elephant habitations. This area once served [as](#) a transit for elephants in between [Kaziranga](#) and Karbi Anglong. With the establishment of [NRL](#) in Telgaram in the 90s, elephant depredation reached an alarming proportion. Incidents of man-elephant conflict only increased [over](#) the years resulting in casualties on both sides. To make matters [worse](#), [NRL](#) brought into its possession a stretch of Deopahar PRF (interestingly the part of the PRF was sold to [NRL](#) by the Jorhat-based Numaligarh TE) and tried to secure it by constructing a boundary [wall](#), [2](#) km in stretch, on this traditional elephant corridor. The illegal boundary [wall](#) became a huge physical barrier for the elephants blocking their [normal](#) movement. In a number of cases baby elephants got trapped inside these erections and were separated from the herd. The pachyderms were even seen hitting at the walls trying to get rid of these obstructions.

Further, the [wall](#) was constructed inside the “No [Development](#) Zone” violating the norms of the [National](#) Green Tribunal. [As](#) per NDZ notification, the expansion of industrial area, townships, infrastructure and such other activities which could [lead](#) to pollution and congestion shall not be allowed within the NDZ. The NOC issued for the old [NRL](#) town ship by MoEF vide DO No.J-11014//91-1A.II, 18 -01-1994 prohibits use of hill slopes, forest area and states that no organized human settlement in the hill or the areas adjoining the hill at least in a radius of [10](#) km be allowed. It appears that the [NRL](#) might have hidden these facts while applying for the extra land. The expansion of [NRL](#) town area has been another cause of concern that has become a threat to the elephant habitat in the Deopahar fringe. Moreover the use of high voltage lights, heavy construction equipments and vehicles day and night in the immediate vicinity of the PRF is causing disturbance to the pachyderm population.

The Divisional Forest Officer, Golaghat Mutthu Kumar Ravel said that he issued a letter no. B/13/ [NRL](#) Const/1295-98 dated 02/05/15 asking the [NRL](#) authority, Guwahati to take immediate action and remove the barrier constructed illegally that is blocking the [normal](#) movement of elephants in the area. Even after the issuing of the letters, [NRL](#) is yet to comply with the instruction of the Forest Department. On the other hand, continuing with its anti-conservation activities, [NRL](#) of late has cleared huge stretch of forest land in the “no development zone” of the Deopahar PRF for developing a golf course. In this connection, the Golaghat Forest Division appointed Santanu Barua, ACF, (vide order no 38 dated 20/05/15) to conduct a detailed inquiry into the illegal clearing of forest area and illegal cutting and mining of earth/hillocks in the forest fringe. Although there was an earlier approval for operating (felling) certain numbers of trees in a restricted area, however, after the receipt of the [Environment](#) Clearance by the State Level [Environment](#) Impact Assessment Authority (SEIAA) the same was withdrawn later (before the final approval) due to violations (Letter No- B/32/PP/2685-92 dated 23/[10](#)/14). Recently, another letter was issued to the [NRL](#) management in this regard (Letter No-B/13/[NRL](#)-Const/1302-1305 dated 02/05/15).

The land acquired by the [NRL](#) is in clear violation of the established laws, rules and conditions. Further the areas in questions were serving [as](#) a critical wildlife corridors and part of a larger ecosystem and catchment.

DFO Kumar further stressed: “while there exists a number of alternatives for [NRL](#), the loss of such critical forests, [animal](#) corridors, biodiversity and ecosystem cannot be recreated. Rather the [NRL](#) should have developed a wasteland and build its township and definitely not by destroying forests, corridors and ecosystem at the cost of the [state as](#) well [as](#) present and future generations”.



Elephant enter at NRL Township

Industrial impact

There is no denying the fact that for an industrially impoverish [state](#) like Assam, there is every need to boost industrial growth. However, the rush to boost industrial growth rode roughshod [over](#) long-term environmental concerns [as](#) much of the investments are now on polluting industries like coke and cement, oil and [gas](#) extraction. In a biodiversity rich [state](#) like Assam, indiscriminate licensing of polluting industries already showed signs of grave environmental consequences. Excessive burning of natural [gas](#), rampant use of pesticides in the seemingly non hazardous tea industry has brought Assam's geographical identification—the cultivation and production of the golden Muga-- to almost half of what the [state](#) produced 20 years back.

While the damaging impact of the polluting industries is felt more in the tea-oil-[gas](#) rich upper Assam districts where agriculture and environment had been adversely affected, the so called People's Refinery that was born out of the Assam [Accord](#) after six long years of struggle, is bulldozing its way to spell doom to a critical habitat in the [Kaziranga](#) and Karbi-Anglong landscape. The natural eco-systems are complex and sensitive, where each species has a role and is symbiotically dependent on other species. With destruction of forest cover and cutting and mining of hillocks, [NRL](#) has already inflicted irreparable damage to Deopahar changing the topography of the area known for its rich and endemic biodiversity.



[Photo: Samarjit Sharma](#)

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