



To:

Dr. Y.S. Rajasekhara Reddy,
Hon'ble Chief Minister of Andhra Pradesh,
'C' Block, 4th Floor, A.P Secretariat,
Hyderabad 500 022.
Tel: 044 23456698
Fax: 044 23452498
Email: cmap@ap.gov.in

3 October 2007

Sub: Reported clearing of forests in Kawal Sanctuary and other parts of Andhra Pradesh

Dear Dr. Reddy,

We are alarmed by recent reports in various newspapers of forest clearing and cutting of trees inside the Kawal Wildlife Sanctuary and other parts of Andhra Pradesh. The extent of ongoing damage is not clear, nor is it clear as to who the key instigators and violators are. Some reports suggest that forests are being cleared for cultivation, with the hope that these will be regularized under the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers' (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act 2006, others suggest that these are part of a trend that has going on for some years now.

Whatever the reasons, any clearing of forests within Kawal and other important wildlife habitats, is not acceptable. The Forest Rights Act is meant to secure the rights and interests of adivasis and others who are *already* occupying land, *not* for allowing any fresh clearing of forests. *Not a single acre of standing forest can be cleared under this Act for the purpose of cultivation or occupation.* If indeed the Act is being used to do this, it is a clear misuse and the state government must immediately put a stop to it.

Indeed, we believe that if used judiciously and in its true spirit, the Act can both secure rights and livelihoods, as also enhance conservation by providing a stake amongst forest-dwellers to protect the standing forest around them. But this requires the state government machinery to be alert against any misuse, and to set up institutional structures and mechanisms by which the twin objectives of livelihoods and conservation can be met. *Without forests, in any case, how will forest-dwellers including adivasis survive?*

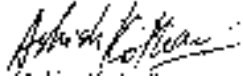
For many years now, it has also been shown that part of the reason for increasing encroachment into forests is the failure of successive state governments to carry out land reforms that would have provided land to the landless and to marginal farmers. This situation needs urgent rectification.

We urge that:

1. An impartial enquiry by eminent people who are completely independent of the government be commissioned, to bring out the truth of the news reports regarding forest felling, its actual reasons, and to suggest ways out that can protect the forest while meeting the genuine needs of adivasi and other traditionally occupant forest-dwellers, including long-pending land reforms outside forest areas;
2. The state government prepare all necessary records and evidences for the implementation of the Forest Rights Act, in particular to ensure that traditional communities are given their genuine rights while also setting up structures and measures by which forests around and adjacent to them are effectively protected.
3. Steps be taken at Kawal Wildlife Sanctuary (and any other protected area similarly affected), to (a) ensure the integrity of wildlife (including tiger) habitat, (b) meaningfully involve local people conservation and management, and (c) provide such communities appropriate benefits derived from the protected area including through employment, non-timber forest produce harvested sustainably, and community-managed tourism.

We look forward to your response to this appeal.

Thanking you,



(Ashish Kothari)

Cc:

Principal Secretary to the Chief Minister's Office, Andhra Pradesh
Ministry of Environment and Forests, Government of India
Ministry of Tribal Affairs, Government of India