UNESCO has warned that the exceptional and globally important natural resources of the Sundarbans could be endangered. UNESCO's World Heritage Centre feared that this forest was at risk due to the construction of Rampal power plant at Bagerhat, vessels navigating through the Sundarbans and industries being set up near the area.

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) has issued a letter to the government saying that that the Sundarbans would lose its world heritage status if the government failed to protect the natural resources of this forest which was akin to the lungs of Bangladesh. The Sundarbans would then be moved from the 'world heritage list' to the 'endangered world heritage list'.

UNESCO's world heritage commission has also raised objections to using the river Pasur as a navigation route. Referring to the government's plans to dredge the river, UNESCO has said that these three activities will harm the natural resources of the Sundarbans.

UNESCO issued a letter to the government in this regard, mentioning that that due to the Rampal power plant and the river channel being started up, more power plants and polluting industries were being planned in the area.

UNESCO has asked for a report by 1 February, detailing the initiatives, which have been taken to protect the Sundarbans.

Pointing out that the power plant, river channel, industries and river dredging would to the Sundarbans irreparable damage, the UN organisation called upon the government to stop these initiatives. It said that no activities should be allowed near the Sundarbans that would cause it irreparable harm.

A letter signed by Kishore Rao, director of UNESCO's world heritage centre, was sent to the Bangladesh ambassador at UNESCO on 11 July this year. Then on 18 July the ambassador Shahidul Islam sent letters to the environment and forest ministry, the foreign ministry, the power division and the Bangladesh UNESCO commission, informing them of the matter. He called upon the environment and forest to take the main responsibility regarding possible damage to the Sundarbans.

Minister for environment and forest Anwar Hossain Manju told Prothom Alo that he had not received any such letter. The ministry hadn't informed him anything about the matter either. However, he said, the environment and forest ministry would continue to work for the protection of the Sundarbans as it had in the past.

The letter from UNESCO stated, according to the rules, the countries, which had world heritage sites, would have to submit reports annually to UNESCO, with an update on the conservation status of the heritage sites. Bangladesh was supposed to have submitted its report on 1 February, but failed to do so.

On 8 September, senior assistant secretary Zillur Rahman of the power, energy and mineral resources division, sent a letter to the Bangladesh Power Development Board and the Bangladesh-India Friendship Power Company regarding the conservation of the Sundarbans. It mentioned that a report would have to be submitted to UNESCO. On 25 August, UNESCO's national commission secretary Manzur Hossain also sent a letter in this regard to the power division secretary.

The conservation of the Sundarbans was also discussed at UNESCO's annual meeting at Doha, Qatar, in June this year. Last month UNESCO posted the minutes of that meeting on its website.
It was stated there that the world heritage centre wanted to know the details about the coal-fired power plant being set up 10km from the Mongla port, by the side of the river Pasur.

The UNESCO minutes stated that Rampal power plant wasn't the only major problem. The power plant would be a catalyst to even worse polluting industries cropping up near the Sundarbans.

UNESCO has asked the government on 11 April for information about another power plant to be constructed next to the Rampal project. Bangladesh has not responded.

Environmental expert and Emeritus professor of Brac University Ainun Nishat told Prothom Alo the Bangladesh has added the issue of protection of the environment, water bodies and biodiversity, to the constitution. The government had committed itself to the protection of all three. Therefore, for constitutional reasons, the government should place importance on UNESCO's concern.

Pointing to UNESCO's assessment of the Rampal coal-fired power plant, the letter said that the Rampal power plant was 65km from the Sundarban world heritage site and wildlife sanctuary. The smoke and ashes that would be emitted from the power plant would seriously harm the biodiversity and natural resources of the forest. The transportation of coal would also pollute the air and water of the Sundarbans.

The report said that the large vessels to be used to carry coal would cause erosion of the river banks. The Sundarbans was the home to the endangered Bengal Tiger and Sundarbans' river Pasur was home to the endangered dolphin and the river terrapin (batagur baska). Then there was the otter, local fish and other endangered animals. The power plant would push these animals rapidly towards extinction.

Earlier, in September, the Ramsar authorities, the UN organisation dealing with the conservation of globally important wetlands, expressed its concern about the Sundarbans. They issued a letter to the government expressing their concern about Rampal power plant being set up next to the Sundarbans and asked the government for information in this regard.