Thousands hold ‘Global Protest Day’ to support world’s largest mangrove forest

11 January 2017 / Morgan Erickson-Davis

Organizers estimate more than 4,000 people gathered around the world on Saturday to protest the development of a power plant being built just upstream of the Sundarbans mangrove in Bangladesh.

- At more than 10,000 square kilometers, the Sundarbans is the world’s biggest mangrove area and a UNESCO World Heritage Site.
- It is home to hundreds of species of plants and animals, provides important ecosystem services to human communities, and sequesters millions of tons of carbon.
- A 1,320-megawatt, coal-fired power plant is being built just upriver from the Sundarbans, and critics say it threatens the mangrove as well as human health.
- UNESCO has urged its cancellation and relocation.
- On Saturday, January 7, an estimated 4,000 people held rallies in cities around the world protesting the power plant and urging increased protection of the Sundarbans.

Plans for a huge power plant situated near the world’s largest mangrove forest in Bangladesh has incited outrage from many Bangladeshi conservationists and citizens. This weekend, those in other countries rose up to show their criticism of the project, with a Global Protest Day stirring protests around the world.

Environmental NGO representatives estimate thousands of people took to the streets on Saturday, January 7, to show their opposition to the Rampal power plant and their support of the Sundarbans mangrove.

The Sundarbans lies along the northern shore of the Bay of Bengal, straddling the border between India and Bangladesh. Encompassing more than 10,000 square kilometers (3,860 square miles), the mangrove is the world’s largest and provides habitat for around 700 animal and 340 plant species. Endangered Bengal tigers roam its forests, as do huge, cow-like animals called gaurs, which are listed as Vulnerable by the IUCN. Its waters are home to the only two remaining species of freshwater dolphins in Asia: the threatened Irrawaddy river dolphin (Orcaella brevirostris) and the endangered Ganges river dolphin (Platanista gangetica).

Because of its ecological importance, the Sundarbans is recognized by UNESCO as a World Heritage Site; it’s also a Ramsar bird conservation area.

Sundarbans mangrove forest at mid-tide. Photo by V. Malik via Wikimedia Commons (CC 2.0)
The site for the Rampal power plant sits along the Pasur River just upstream from the Sundarbans mangrove. Global Forest Watch shows that the Sundarbans is to a T2 Tiger Conservation Landscape, meaning that it could double the wild Bengal tiger population there through proper conservation and management by 2024. Satellite imagery from early 2016 (upper-right inset) shows development proceeding at the Rampal site.

In addition to its importance for animal and plant populations, the Sundarbans also provides ecosystem services for human communities.

“It has been estimated that more than one million people depend on the Sundarbans for their livelihood, many of whom work seasonally as fishermen and gather non-timber forest products that include nipa palm, honey, leaves and grass,” according to a 2015 report released by the finance industry watchdog BankTrack.

Mangroves also have global benefits, with their vegetation hedging against global warming by storing carbon. Indeed, studies show mangroves sequester more carbon in the ground than terrestrial trees. In total, research indicates the Sundarbans contained around 56 million metric tons of carbon in 2010, with an economic value of $290 million annually.

Global Forest Watch shows the portion of the Sundarbans with the greatest aboveground biomass density is most closely situated to the Rampal power plant, with up to around 250 metric tons of carbon per hectare.
The Sundarbans also contains comparatively high levels of soil carbon. These are some of the reasons why people in Bangladesh and abroad are up in arms about the construction of a coal-fired, 1,320-megawatt power plant along a river a few miles upstream from the mangroves. Called the Rampal power plant, the project is a joint venture between India and Bangladesh aimed at boosting Bangladesh’s paltry energy supply. Construction is currently proceeding and the plant is expected to be operational by 2021.

But critics say the plant may harm the Sundarbans’ ecosystems and wildlife, and even endanger human health. “The right to health for women and children is at risk with the construction of coal plants. Our experience in the Philippines is that many suffer from skin disease and asthma because of ash fall. It is also dangerous to pregnant and breastfeeding women. Food security is also violated because water becomes polluted and coal plants occupy large tracts of land that should be devoted to agriculture instead,” Edna Velarde, Program Coordinator of National Federation for Peasant Women (AMIHAN), Philippines, said in a statement.

The UNESCO World Heritage Committee has also expressed concern about Rampal power plant, with a 2016 report concluding its presence will result in damage to the Sundarbans. Because of this, the committee urged that the plant’s construction be “cancelled and relocated to a more suitable location.” Critics have been protesting the plant since 2013, including a rally held in March 2016 in which thousands of Bangladeshis marched from Dhaka to the Sundarbans.

Despite the backlash, Bangladesh has stuck with the project, prompting a two-day “March towards Dhaka” in November, while Cambridge University students in the UK held a cycle rally in solidarity.

But Saturday’s protest was the most global yet. Participant organizations say 4,000 people rallied around the world, from Dhaka to Berlin, Melbourne to New York City.

“We hope that the global solidarity will lead towards energy democracy where local people, especially women, can make decisions over the use of their resources and energy needs,” Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development, wrote in a statement, “and also open up the opportunity to create worldwide awareness for environment and ecology-friendly power generations and sustainable development that put people and environment before corporate profit.”

Banner photo: Protesters gather outside Union Station in New York City. Photo by Zawaad Abdallah / Friends of the Earth

Citations:
- World Resources Institute, derived from the Harmonized World Soil Database. “Soil Organic Carbon”. Accessed through Global Forest Watch Climate on [date]. climate.globalforestwatch.org

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