

# **PRESS RELEASE - TSETEN LEPCHA**

**13<sup>th</sup> March 2015**

In continuation of our efforts to protect and preserve the rich natural bio-diversity of Sikkim, petition/application No. 15 of 2015/EZB was filed before the Hon'ble National Green Tribunal, Eastern Zonal Bench and the same has been admitted.

The need to file this petition necessitated after the Forest, Environment and Wildlife Management Department, Govt. of Sikkim, proposed the reduction of Eco-Sensitive Zones in Sikkim from the existing Supreme Court mandated 10 kms to mere 25 meters and 200 meters in the no man's zone along the international border.

The Eco Sensitive Zones have been earmarked to work as a shock absorber around the national parks and sanctuaries (protected areas) as well as areas which have rich biodiversity and needed preservation.

However, the ESZ didn't not necessarily hinder any developmental activities as there are provisions due to which many activities were permitted, some regulated and few prohibited. Till the new notification was issued, in Sikkim mainly mining was prohibited, hydro projects/hotels were regulated (permitted after fulfilling certain conditions/getting clearance from the Standing Committee of the National Board for Wildlife).

The classic example of development work with proper monitoring by environmental agencies is the Skywalk at Baleybunga. This project is in the core zone of Maenam Wild Life Sanctuary, yet, clearance has been given after the conditions were followed.

The reduction of the ESZ was mooted with the wrong notion that there weren't any developmental work by few individuals, which probably misled the govt and general public, in the process has caused serious damage to the rich bio-diversity of Sikkim.

Further, based on the submission of the state govt, the Ministry of Environment, Forest & Climate Change issued draft notification for the declaration of Eco Sensitive Zones in Sikkim and has asked for response from the people. Accordingly, many civil society organizations, eco-development committees, Panchayats and individuals had protested the proposed unacceptable reduction of the zones and given in writing within the stipulated time to the MoEF. Unfortunately the govt ignored all the suggestions and went ahead with the declaration of the EZS in Sikkim.

Having no option, the undersigned had issued a legal notice to the ministry demanding that the new notification should be stopped, but there was no response.

Thereafter, having exhausted all available options and getting no positive response, this petition has been filed with the prayer that the notification dated 27th August 2014 of the Eco Sensitive Zones around the protected areas in the State of Sikkim be quashed and fresh notification should be issued in accordance with the legislative policy regarding the same. Further, prayer for stay of the new notification has been submitted till the pendency of the application and till such time the old 10 km zone be continued.

This petition has been submitted in my individual capacity as a person living in the buffer zone of the Kanchenjunga Biosphere Reserve/Khangchendzonga National Park and being affected by the decision to reduce the ESZ and not necessarily representing any organization.

Our gratitude to our legal counsels: Mr Ritwick Dutta, Rahul Choudhary, Ms Neha Kurien and Mr Sankar Prasad Pani (Kolkata, Legal Initiative for environment - LIFE)

Tseten Lepcha, Petitioner

Chungthang, North Sikkim