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Concerns Over Drilling in Dibru-Saikhowa National Park

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Why in News

The **National Green Tribunal (NGT)** has issued notices to the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEFCC), Oil India Limited (OIL) and two concerned state entities to explain **how environmental clearances for the seven proposed drilling sites in the Dibru- Saikhowa National Park were given.**

The NGT took note of the petitioners' contention that OIL **did not carry out a biodiversity assessment study** for the seven-well exploratory drilling project besides **not conducting a public hearing** as mandated by the **Environment Impact Assessment (EIA) Notification of 2006.**

Key Points

- OIL has clarified that its **exploratory drilling project is “under” and not “in” the 765 sq km Dibru-Saikhowa National Park.** This argument is based on **Extended Reach Drilling (ERD)** enabled drilling of wells up to a depth of approximately 4 km from an existing well plinth **without entering the protected area.**
 - OIL had obtained permission for the seven wells in 2016 on the basis of the **ERD** technology.
 - ERD is drilling a well horizontally to at least twice its vertical depth.
 - It is extensively used to intersect hydrocarbon targets far from the surface or areas of the reservoir that otherwise were difficult to access.
- The notice has been issued following **a gas leak that occurred at OIL's baghjan oil field,** located near the Dibru-Saikhowa National Park.

The disaster at Baghjan has **impacted the surrounding ecological life and displaced close to 11,000 people** from their homes.
- Earlier, the NGT had also ordered the formation of a committee to probe **allegations of large-scale illegal coal mining** by North Eastern Coalfields inside **Dehing Patkai Elephant Reserve** in Assam's Tinsukia district.

- **Natural Resources in Assam:**

- The State is **one of the richest biodiversity zones** in the world and consists of tropical rainforests, deciduous forests, riverine grasslands, bamboo orchards and numerous wetland ecosystems.
- Assam has wildlife sanctuaries, the most prominent of which are two **UNESCO World Heritage sites**-the **Kaziranga National Park** and the **Manas Wildlife Sanctuary**. There are **three other National Parks** in Assam namely **Dibru Saikhowa National Park, Nameri National Park and the Orang National Park**.

Kaziranga is a home to **Indian one-horned rhinoceros** which has also been recognized as the **State Animal of Assam**.

- Assam has **abundant mineral resources**- coal, petroleum; limestone and natural gas are the principal mineral resources.
 - It is also the **largest producer of crude oil in India**.
 - **OIL** is the second largest hydrocarbon exploration and production Indian public sector company with its operational headquarters in Duliajan, Assam under the administrative control of the Ministry of Petroleum and Natural Gas.

Dibru-Saikhowa National Park

- Dibru-Saikhowa is a **National Park as well as a Biosphere Reserve** situated in the south bank of the river Brahmaputra in Assam.
- The forest type of Dibru-Saikhowa comprises semi-evergreen forests, deciduous forests, littoral and swamp forests and patches of wet evergreen forests.

It is the **largest swamp forest in north-eastern India**.
- It is an **identified Important Bird Area (IBA)**, notified by the Birdlife International. It is most famous for the rare white-winged wood ducks as well as feral horses.
- Mammals found in the Park include **Tiger**, Elephant, Leopard, Jungle Cat, Bears, Small Indian Civet, Squirrels, **Gangetic Dolphin**, **Hoolock Gibbon**, etc.
- **Maguri Motapung wetland** is a part of the Reserve.

Source: TH