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Green Tribunal Steps in to Conserve Ghats

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The National Green Tribunal (NGT) has restrained the **six Western Ghats States** (Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Goa, Maharashtra and Gujarat), from giving environmental clearance to activities that may adversely impact the eco-sensitive areas of the mountain ranges.

- The panel further directed not to reduce the extent of Eco-Sensitive Zones of Western Ghats, taking cognizance of the recent floods in Kerala.
- Earlier the Madhav Gadgil-led Western Ghats Ecology Expert Panel (WGEEP) report had created a political furore in the State with most of the political parties and a section of the church opposing it.
- Therefore the Government appointed Kasturirangan-led High Level Working Group, to look into the WGEEP report. The Kasturirangan panel reduced areas under the eco-sensitive zone.
- The Government accepted the Kasthurirangan report and issued the draft notifications on ecologically sensitive zones.

Western Ghats Ecology Expert Panel (WGEEP)

- A committee headed by ecologist **Madhav Gadgil** also known as the Western Ghats Ecology Expert Panel (WGEEP) in 2011 recommended that **all of the Western Ghats be declared as the Ecological Sensitive Areas (ESA)** with only limited development allowed in graded zones.
- The panel had classified the Western Ghats into **Ecologically Sensitive Zones (ESZ) 1, 2 and 3** of which ESZ-1 is high priority, almost all developmental activities (mining, thermal power plants etc) were restricted in it.
- Further, no new dams based on large-scale storage be permitted in ESZ 1.
- It specified that the system of governance of the environment should be **bottom to top approach (right from Gram sabhas)** rather than a top to bottom approach.
- Constitution of a **Western Ghats Ecology Authority (WGEA)**, as a statutory authority under the Ministry of Environment and Forests, with the powers under Section 3 of the Environment (Protection) Act, 1986.

- The report was criticized for being more environment-friendly and not in tune with the ground realities.

Kasturirangan committee

The committee's major recommendations were:

- Instead of the total area of Western Ghats, **only 37% (i.e. 60,000 sq. km.) of the total area to be brought under ESA.**
- Complete ban on mining, quarrying and sand mining in ESA.
- Current mining areas in the ESA should be phased out within the next five years, or at the time of expiry of mining lease, whichever is earlier.
- No thermal power projects to be allowed and hydropower projects be allowed only after detailed study.
- Red industries i.e. which are highly polluting to be strictly banned.
- The report recommended exclusion of inhabited regions and plantations from the purview of ESAs making it a pro farmer approach.
- The Kasturirangan report was accepted by all states, however Kerala was most vocal against the report.

Way forward

- It is a Development vs Conservation debate and politicisation of the issue will not give any fruitful results.
- In the light of recent Kerala floods, a proper analysis based on scientific study followed by consensus among various stake holders by addressing respective concerns is required urgently.
- Holistic view of threats and demands on the forest land, products and services, devising strategies to address these with clearly stated objectives for the authorities involved must be taken.
- Destruction in the name of development should not be encouraged and sustainable development should be given priority.
- Any further delay in the implementation will only accentuate degrading of the most prized natural resource of the country.