



Plea on Western Ghats

For Prelims: Western Ghats, Ecologically Sensitive Areas (ESA), Gadgil Committee, Western Ghats Ecology Expert Panel (WGEEP), Kasturirangan Committee.

For Mains: Significance of Western Ghats, Threats Faced by Western Ghats.

Why in News?

Recently, the Supreme Court has dismissed a **Public Interest Litigation (PIL)**, which challenged the [Gadgil and Kasturirangan Committees](#) on [Western Ghats Ecologically Sensitive Area \(ESA\)](#).

What are Eco-Sensitive Areas?

- Eco-Sensitive Areas (ESAs) are areas notified by the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEFCC) **around Protected Areas**, National Parks and Wildlife Sanctuaries under the [Environment Protection Act 1986](#).
- The basic aim is **to regulate certain activities around National Parks and Wildlife Sanctuaries** so as to minimize the negative impacts of such activities on the fragile ecosystem encompassing the protected areas.

What was the PIL?

- The petitioner had pleaded to the apex court to not implement the recommendations of the Western Ghats Ecologically Expert Panel (**Gadgil Committee Report**) and the **High-Level Working Group (Kasturirangan Committee Report)**.
- It asked the court to **declare the 2018 draft notification** by the Union Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEF&CC) **as ultra vires** (beyond its legal power or authority) as it may lead to the **violation of the Right To Life of the citizens** hailing from the Western Ghats, especially Kerala.
- The **petition pushed** for the implementation of the 2014 report of the **expert committee set up** by the former Chief Minister of Kerala.
 - The report recommended implementing changes in clauses of the **Environmentally Fragile Land (EFL)** in the Western Ghats, stating the **lapses occurred in determining the EFL areas**.

What did SC Rule?

- But the apex court dismissed the petition stating that the MoEF&CC draft notification it challenged in 2018, was followed by a **fifth draft notification** that was issued in July 2022.
 - The draft notification issued in July prohibits activities like **mining, thermal power plants, and all 'Red' category** industries from coming up in the ESA.
- The Court did not find **any reason to exercise its jurisdiction under Article 32** of the Constitution of India.

What do the Committees say?

- **Gadgil Committee:**
 - Also known as the [Western Ghats Ecology Expert Panel \(WGEEP\)](#), it recommended that all of the Western Ghats be declared as the Ecological Sensitive Areas (ESA) with only limited development allowed in graded zones.
 - It classified the whole of the Western Ghats, spread across six states and covering 44 districts and 142 talukas, as an **Eco-Sensitive Zone (ESZ)**.
- **Kasturirangan Committee:**
 - It sought to **balance development and environment protection** in contrast to the system proposed by the Gadgil report.
 - The [Kasturirangan committee](#) recommended that instead of the total area of Western Ghats, only **37% of the total area should be brought under ESA** and a complete ban on mining, quarrying and sand mining be imposed in ESA.

What do we Need to Know about the Western Ghats?

- **About:**
 - Western Ghats consist of **a chain of mountains running parallel to India's Western Coast** and passing from the states of **Kerala, Maharashtra, Goa, Gujarat, Tamil Nadu and Karnataka**.
- **Significance:**
 - The Ghats **influence the Indian monsoon weather patterns** that mediate the warm tropical climate of the region.
 - They act as a **barrier to rain-laden monsoon winds** that sweep in from the south-west.
 - Western Ghats are **home to tropical evergreen forests**, as well as to 325 globally threatened species.
- **Threats to Western Ghats:**
 - **Developmental Pressures:**
 - Urbanisation together with agricultural expansion and livestock grazing are posing **serious threats to the region**.
 - About 50 million people are estimated to live in the Western Ghats Region, resulting in developmental pressures that are orders of magnitude greater than many protected areas around the world.
 - **Biodiversity Relates Issues:**
 - Forest loss, habitat fragmentation, habitat degradation by invasive **plant species, encroachment and conversion also continue** to affect the Ghats.
 - Fragmentation caused by development pressure in the Western **Ghats is shrinking the availability of wildlife corridors** and suitable habitats outside Protected Areas.
 - **Climate Change:**
 - In the intermediate years, the climate crisis has gained momentum:
 - **In the past four years (2018-21)**, floods have ravaged the ghat areas of Kerala thrice killing hundreds of people and delivering an overwhelming blow to infrastructure and livelihoods
 - **Landslides and flash floods** ravaged the ghat areas of Konkan in 2021
 - Cyclones are also gaining intensity with the warming of the Arabian Sea leaving the west coast especially vulnerable.
 - **Threats from Industrialisation:**
 - More polluting industries, **quarries and mines, roads, and townships are likely to be planned due to the absence** of the Western Ghats ESA policy.
 - This implies more damage to the fragile landscape of the region in future.

Way Forward

- Considering the changes in climate, which would affect the livelihood of all people and hurt the nation's economy, **it is prudent to conserve the fragile ecosystems**.
- A proper analysis based on scientific study followed by consensus among various stakeholders

addressing respective **concerns is required urgently.**

- A 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.

UPSC Civil Services Examination Previous Year Question (PYQ)

Q. 'Gadgil Committee Report' and 'Kasturirangan Committee Report', sometimes seen in the news, are related to (2016)

- (a) constitutional reforms
- (b) Ganga Action Plan
- (c) linking of rivers
- (d) protection of Western Ghats

Ans: (d)

Exp:

- Gadgil Committee Report and Kasturirangan Committee Report are both related to the protection of Western Ghats.
- Gadgil Committee was formed by the Ministry of Environment in 2010 to study the impact of population pressure, climate change and development activities on the Western Ghats.
- Kasturirangan Committee was formed in 2012 for finding a holistic way of protecting the biodiversity of the Western Ghats and addressing the rightful aspirations for inclusive growth and sustainable development of indigenous residents.
- **Therefore, option (d) is the correct answer.**

Source: DTE

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